

# BROOKLYN RAIL

**ODILI DONALD ODITA with Tom McGlynn**

**"Then I started to realize that any color is African color. You just have to be able to go beyond these preconditions that limit your thinking."**

*OCT 2020*



Odili Donald Odata, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

This past July I had the pleasure of discussing Odili Donald Odata's work with him, live on Zoom, in the context of the Rail's New Social Environment series. Over the last few decades I've tracked the way in which Odata has brought a renewed sense of purpose to abstract painting. In both his individual paintings on canvas and in his wall-sized commissions he exerts a rigorous draftsmanship and a very particular palette that I was anxious to discover more about. Working in the general vicinity of formal abstraction myself, I was curious to hear another such painter's take on the continued valency of abstraction: its purpose past "purposelessness" perhaps. In our present moment of hyper-pluralistic aesthetic investigation (and social and political upheaval and evolution) Odata explores with me here that limit where the assumptions of the abstract painterly tradition ends, and the potentialities of its extended relevance begin. What follows is an edited transcript of our discussion.



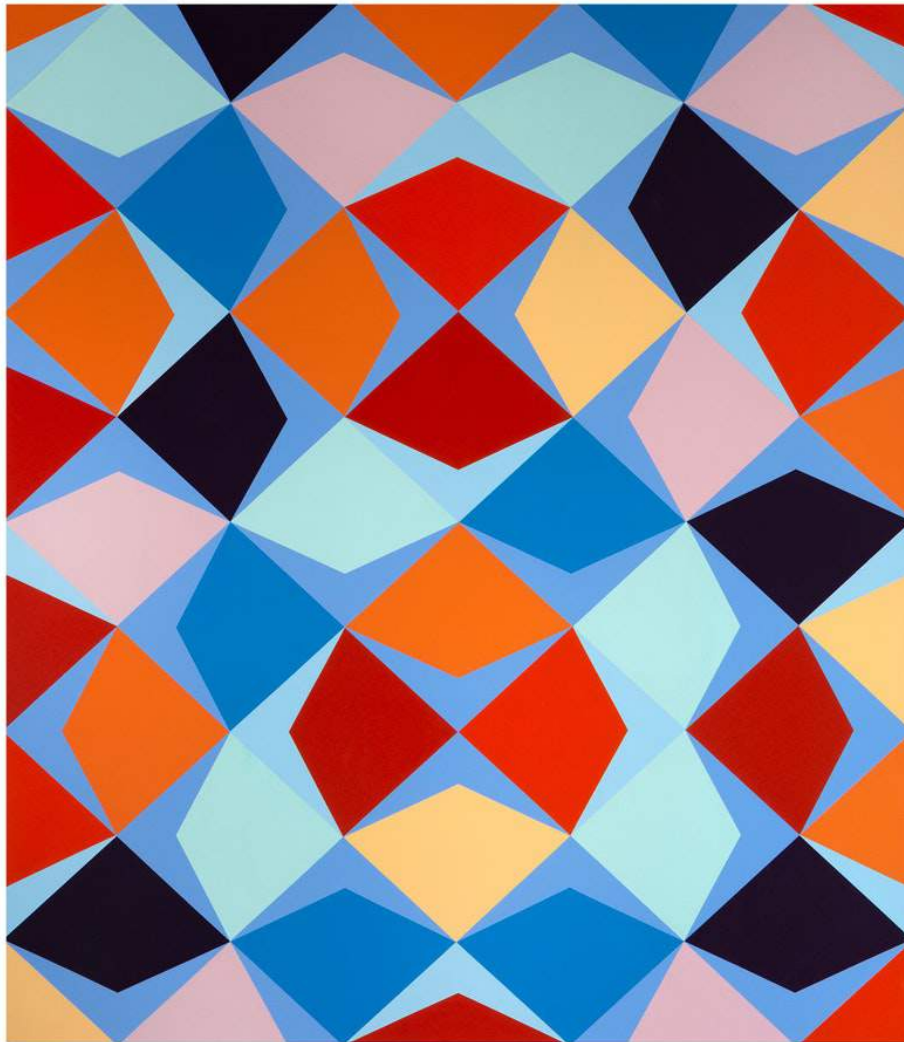
Odili Donald Odita, *Mirror 2*, 2019, Acrylic latex paint on aluminum core fabricated wood panel on reconstituted wood veneer, 92" x 52" inches. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

**Tom McGlynn (Rail):** Good to have this chance to talk, Odili. I've considered your work for a long time and having this opportunity get into it comprehensively is a real pleasure. As you know, I'm an abstract painter too. Perhaps we can begin with the whole question of formalism and abstraction. I know that you've made a reference somewhere that people in general don't like or understand formal abstraction on some level. So I thought it might be interesting to parse some of the formal symbolism in your work, for instance how you deploy the diagonal. There is that apocryphal story of Mondrian and van Doesburg having a serious falling out over the latter's introduction of a diagonal into *De Stijl*, yet beyond a purist creed the diagonal also obtains a range of mixed cultural meanings. The graphic art of your Nigerian heritage, and it's Yoruban mythology of Shango, uses diagonals to symbolically indicate a lightning strike which correlates with the intervention of knowledge, enlightenment. And going back to the genesis of utopian thinking in abstraction you see the diagonal prevalent in the Rayonist compositions of Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov. Then of course there's the Barnett Newman "zip." And besides these cultural and art historical instances, on a basic design level the diagonal can indicate the indeterminacy between the more stable vertical and horizontal orientations.

**Odili Donald Odita:** Thanks for bringing up those references, especially as related to the utopian roots of abstraction. It helps me to go back a little bit into my own project and to remember that when I initially started it, there were aspects that I wanted to engage: information pertaining to cinema and television at the time, and now, even greater so, a relationship to the internet. But I was also thinking about a kind of utopia that would be linked to an idea of the United Nations. This idea of the nations united for the pursuit of peace and freedom in the world. This kind of high-minded utopia that came to me through a comic book I had when I was a kid. And looking at a lot of the structure of late or high modernist abstraction, there are a lot of these types of shapes that come into view, you know, from Suprematism, Cubism onward, but they come into use as a kind of quasi-language for late modernist abstraction in the '50s and '60s. And so that's how the painting actually started, thinking about those ideas in the sense of my being Nigerian, raised in America, and experiencing aspects of this utopian ideal, but seeing it fail in so many places.

I wanted to engage the painting project from that point forward. I came of age as a student in the 1980s looking at "Neo Geo," in particular, and Neo-Expressionism. At the time, there was this criticality based on an "end of history" notion that is also extremely myopically Western. I saw this historical crux for abstract painting as an object that had language, but a language that has become silenced over time with its use. Silenced because those same patterns were to be found everywhere. I would find them on rubber balls at Grand Union and supermarkets like that. Or on wallpaper, or papers in the gift wrap section for a dollar. So you could vicariously get a really fabulous Friedel Dzubas painting that way, you know. So this is the kind of overuse and exhaustion that I saw for abstraction at that time. But to jump to the issue of the diagonal, I liked what you say about the notion of indeterminacy. In fact, for me, the position of change, when you talk about measuring space on an X and Y axis, the Z axis is the diagonal. And that's about space, entering space or exiting space. It's the transition from here to there. And in a way it speaks to the physical, it gets it to the third dimensional. And what you say is really important, actually, because in making it more real in the phenomenal sense, it holds for high Modernist abstraction reiterated in the everyday on a Cheetos bag design, for instance. You're getting this kind of experience in a way

that's maybe missing, misinformed, and misdirected from the original "high" concept or content. But on another hand, it becomes part of the real world. And then in that sense, it's like, what can we do with it, or how can we take it to another place versus just looking at it as only the failure of modernist painting.



Odili Donald Odita, *Iron Butterfly*, 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 60.25" x 52" inches. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

**Rail:** Right. Everyday abstractions like the circular design on the Wonder Bread logo aren't beholden to art history necessarily. Yet there's a circular influence between "high and low" too. The Brillo box was actually designed by an aspiring Abstract Expressionist artist James Harvey. Warhol's appropriation of it later makes more holistic sense in considering the design's original genesis. Simultaneously there persists a cultural hierarchy between what's considered design and art. The critic Frank Getlein meant it as a put-down, in his review in the *New Republic* in 1957, when he tagged Barnett Newman's paintings as part of what he termed the "Design Division" of Abstract Expressionism.

**Odita:** Right, it's an insult. Like the Italian word design "disegno," which means drawing. And to me, that's the best way I can think of design. It's a form of drawing, a form of structuring and organizing. But when you are engaging with the framing, design as a sense of framing or balance, and with a certain kind of predictability, then I believe it doesn't have any use or it becomes valueless. And maybe that's the point when somebody talks about it in the sense of the decorative, or decoration, because it certainly starts to lose meaning when it becomes overly determined in a kind of even-handed balancing act that tends to make it homogenous and boring.

**Rail:** Right. And a lot of these designs—they're timeless, immemorial. They can be repetitive yet even in their most boring forms they retain latent symbolic meaning. When I would appropriate and then deconstruct commercial logos for my own painting and then did the research, I'd find, you know, some Celtic origin in the classic General Electric logo or a medieval guild design in the Purina squares.

**Odita:** But you're talking about something else there, because you're talking about the concretization of history. You're talking about history and time of people being collapsed into this kind of design motif. And when you look at those kinds of things, what you see is endless shifts—endless shifting shapes, endless shifting space, endless shifting patterns. It just multiplies endlessly. And that's the kind of thing that I think is magic. And I'm actually interested in that sort of sort of approach, where you can go beyond predictability and go beyond basically, maybe the structure of the square, you know.

**Rail:** Yes, and one other thing that I came to mind when thinking about diagonals was thinking about them as kind of like free radical orthogonals if we think of the history of Western painting as determined by the ordering of perspectival symbolic form. It seems to be

what you're doing is taking that diagonal perspective orthogonal and distributing it across the lateral expanses of your paintings.

**Odita:** You're bringing up the idea of the horizon—the horizontal, and the horizon as well. When I was younger as an undergraduate in art school, I really loved the artist Blinky Palermo, who would talk a lot about the peripheral. And this idea of seeing something at the corner of your eye, at the edge, and for me over time—and this understanding I have is through some very generous help from a friend, Rochelle Feinstein, when she was a teacher of mine at Bennington College. We talked about the space of the square, and the idea of space within the edge of the square, the canvas. Rochelle said within that space is the center of the world, and that everything outside of the edge of the canvases is non-existent. This comment was in relation to a painting I had made with mulch and wires extending beyond the canvas's edge.

Later, I came to understand in the 1990s that the peripheral is also the space of the Other. That everybody and everything else that's not necessarily important nor significant in the space at the center of the West is placed outside of that canvas square. So, when I'm dealing with horizon, I'm trying to think of a couple of things. The idea of landscape, and in particular, with the paintings I want it to be able to picture multiple things: the scape of cinema, the scape of say, a comic book panel, the scape of a television screen with its test pattern, and also the scape of say, the tourist who goes to some place to dream and vision. So, in that sense, I felt as if I was painting my imaginary Africa. And I was looking at it from the outside, and not from within. I was looking at it like this. And my body then becomes the vertical, in the sense that my body becomes the *zip*; that's the Barnett Newman *zip*. In this sense he's remaking the landscape space of a Caspar David Friedrich painting.

In my context, the painting itself was this atmospheric landscape space and the viewer became that tourist, that dreamer, looking into this space. That's when I realized this whole thing about the body and the significance of it, with a relation to the painting. When I got to the installations and then started seeing people do that for themselves, it confirmed my concept of placing the body in the viewer's position with the painting. But at that time I was only coming at it from the idea of one-point perspective. With the wall installations I saw the expansiveness of space and time being extended in that experience, and then to see the audience without instruction, finding a place within the wall painting and asking a friend to take their picture right at that spot. It just rammed full circle to what I was thinking originally about the idea of landscape, body, positioning, and space.

**Rail:** That transition from painting as image to canvas as place. Speaking of place, you've provided us with some autobiographical information about your family origins in Nigeria.



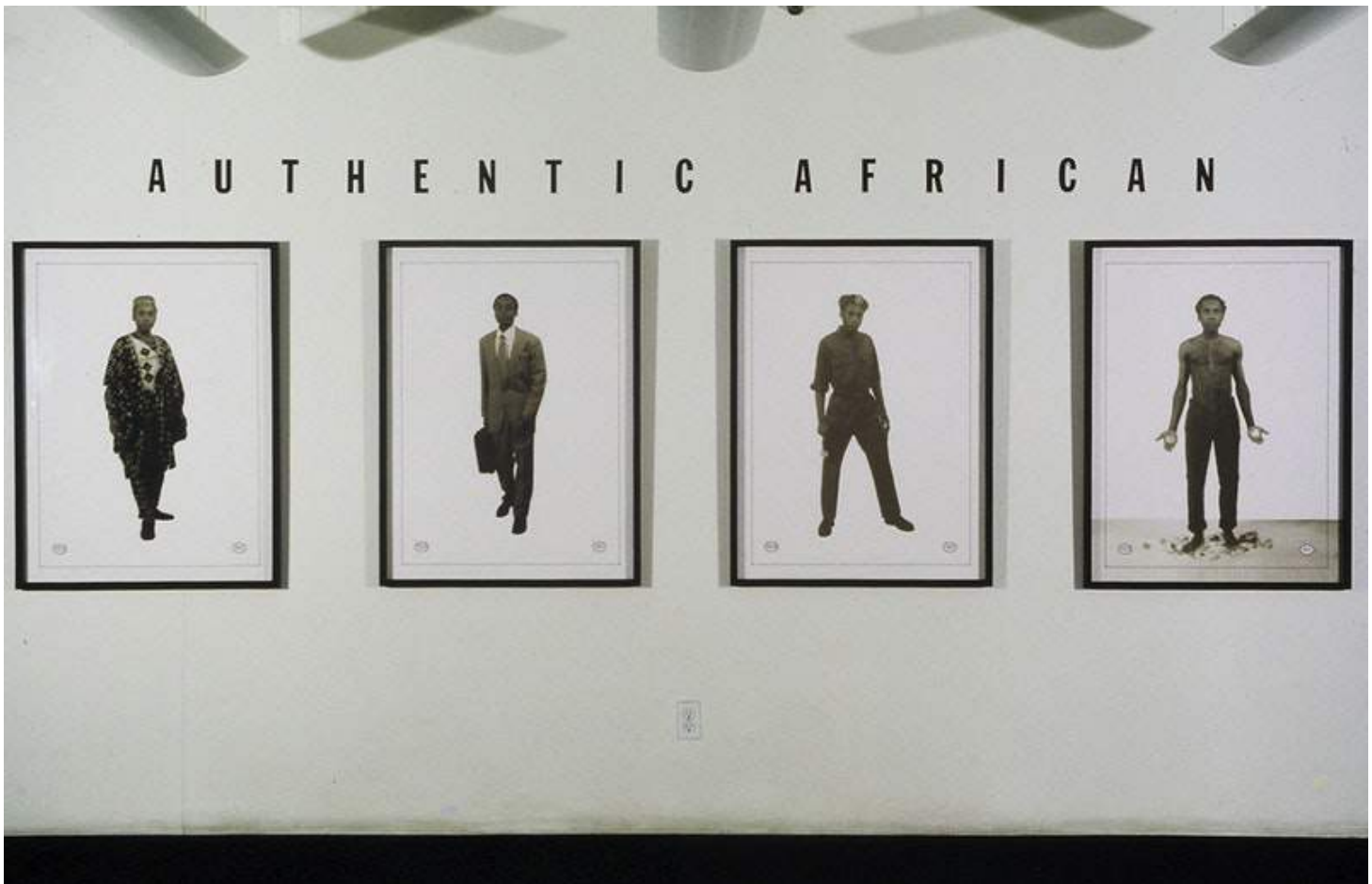
Zaria Art Society/Zaria Rebels, 1958. From left, front row: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo, Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko. Back row: Oseluka Osadebe, Late Nwagbara and Emmanuel Okechukwu Odita, all seven of the eight early members of Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) . Photo: Bruce Onobrakpeya Foundation.

**Odita:** Yes, this image is of the Zaria Art Society in 1958, the inaugural year of the society in the Fine Art department of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology. Subsequently the school was renamed the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The Zaria Art



Society were also called the Zaria Rebels. The person who is standing in the back row, just at the other side of the bow tie fellow, that's my dad who was part of this group. Why it's significant for me—beyond just my family ties—is the fact that this is where social change actually starts. It starts with students, it starts with people who are young like this. From the protesters out there today to the protesters in America in the '60s, to protesters in Western Europe, in the '60s and '70s, to the protesters in the different countries within the continent of Africa. All of them have the same impetus of wanting to change their universities, or wanting to change the way in which they're being educated in this specific case: to have it better fit and adapt to the realities that they want to speak to in their work. And in this case, they were challenging the curriculum to be able to get to more purposeful content in their work that was about local politics, local ideas, and local vision rather than, say, Western European expressions through art. So, this to me is a picture that symbolizes the way in which I want to approach my painting, which ultimately is with the idea of freedom.

When I look back at how I was educated, it wasn't really about what I could do with possibility, in as much as how well I could recite the laws of painting, particularly Western painting. It was all about making paintings to recite what I was taught, rather than to use the skills and tools to make something brand new. And this is also respective to the idea of content, being able to speak about things that mattered to me, versus having to speak about things that mattered to Western art. So this is that. And then I did this conceptual, photo-based work called *Authentic African* in 1997. It's really an American question that I got most of my life growing up in the suburbs in Ohio. And so this is an image of myself in different symbolic African costumes with a "yes" or "no" test bubble underneath each image for the viewer to guess, and maybe pick the correct "authentic African."



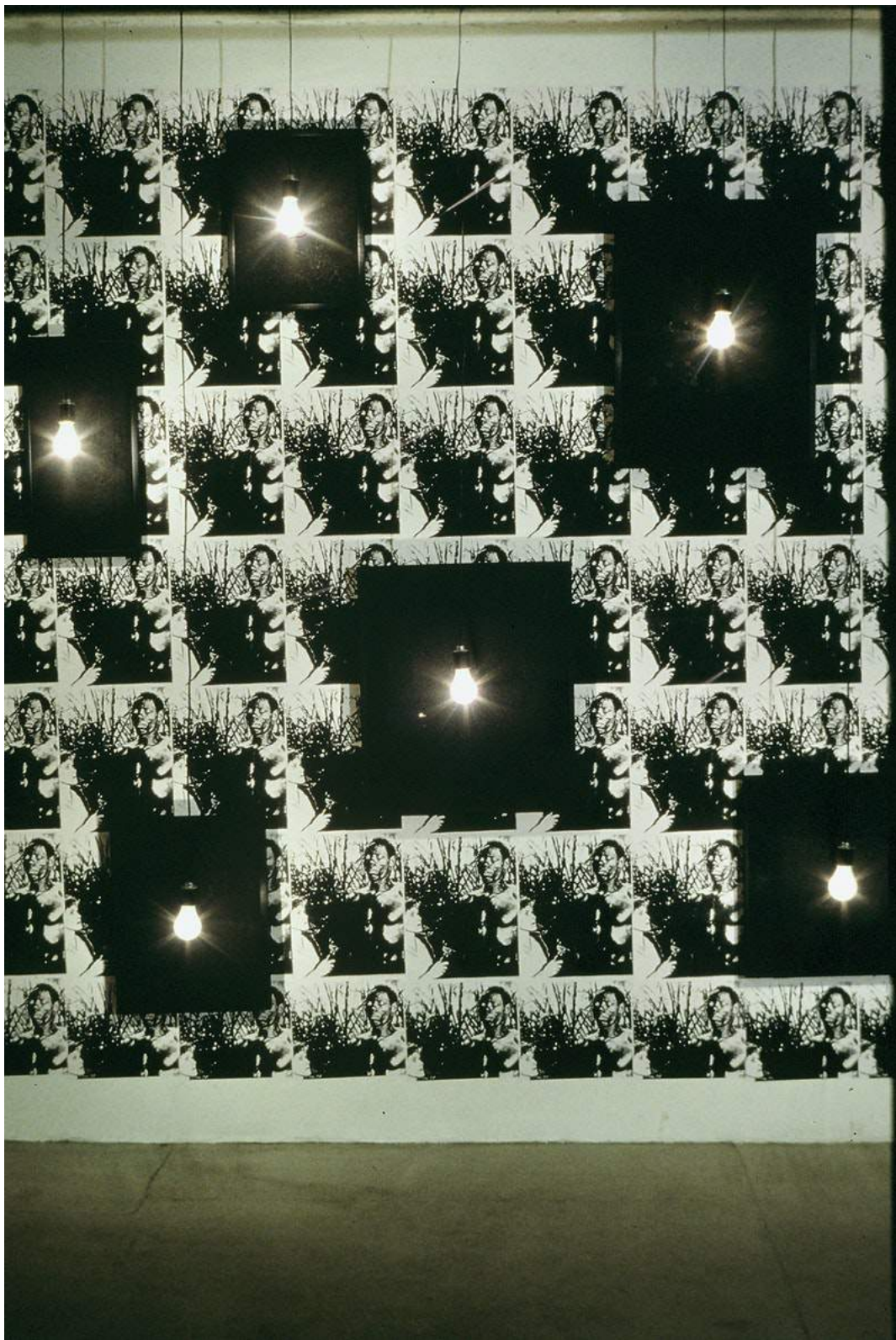
Odili Donald Odita, *Authentic African*, 1997. Digitally manipulated photo, 40 x 30 inches each. Collection of the New School, New York.

**Rail:** It's illuminating to see this early work, I'm most familiar with your later paintings.

**Odita:** After I left graduate school, I went to Ohio State University. Then I went to Bennington College, and then I was in New York and you know, trying to work and make my "late high modernist work." Ultimately, I just stripped it all down to house paint on canvas. But at a certain point, I stopped painting because I didn't feel that painting was really questioning all of the reality I was experiencing in New York, particularly in the early '90s with the onset of identity politics. So I went into photo-based work. I realize in hindsight that in my photo-based work, I was still thinking as a painter, but in the case of the work, I think it was hitting on content that at the time I didn't feel that painting could address.

**Rail:** That leaves the viewer thinking, you know, "Is this like a behavioral exercise?" or, "What is my appropriate response to this behavioral exercise."

**Odita:** And another work from that time, *Object* (1999) was made up of photocopies. That wallpaper in the back are photocopies of a still from a film called *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). The image is of a Black male being found with a flashlight by a white female. I was thinking a lot about the idea of the discovery of Africa as this dark continent. The light bulbs in front of the black pigmented rectangles are formal parallels to what's happening in the image where, again, it's this discussion between white and black and using the idea of value scale to speak about the work in this particular context. And so, it's heightening this notion of discovery. And then at the end of the day, for me the title implies an action and a connection for me: I "object."



Odili Donald Odita, *Object*, 1999. Photocopies, light bulbs, wire and lighting fixtures, framed pigmented panels on wall, approximately 8 x 9 feet.

**Rail:** I could see in this piece too the formal aspect of the arrangement coming in: the grid format.

**Odita:** Yes, I'm making space. I'm making space in a flat context. Yet there are a multitude of them: the photograph space, the photocopied space, the electronic space, the space of the pigmented—those rectangles actually have material that you can see on them; you could touch them. So it's this other kind of tactile space. So the senses are being incorporated in many different ways. It's this polyrhythmic thing that art can do.

**Rail:** And it refers back to what you were talking about in formal and symbolic terms, of the lateral extensivity of the space, rather than the limit being, you know, the square.



**Odita:** Right. I love that about cinema too, just the idea of the big screen, the idea that it's endless, and the idea of the pictures versus the text. At the end, you get the credit texts that just rotate upward. And for me, it was always, where does this begin? It begins on one edge, ends at the other edge, but does it continue—does it literally continue? You have that *Star Wars* opening where the letters are made to go pyramidal into the space, perspectival, but in the case of this film ending, it just goes up and then it disappears. But what happens after that edge? And that was always my question relating to information, relating to culture, relating to ideas and societies.

**Rail:** You could probably critique that *Star Wars* perspective prologue as pretty reactionary. [Laughs] It's much more interesting to see the credit's vertical scrolling counteract the illusionistic depth of a film: shallow against this cinematic picture, this grand lateral extension held in tension with basic information.

**Odita:** That's very perceptive of you. Over time, I've come to understand that perspectival space is not as big or as dominant as cubistic space. There's more space in Cubism than there is in perspectival space. And why? It's because we have the computer. The infinite virtual space of the computer mimics Cubist space. When you think of the idea and notion of what the computer screen is, what it does, with all its hypertexts boxes. And then with imagination that happens and comes into being, in the fact that you're absorbing information of all kinds, reading things, looking at things and imagining things. You're realizing that this relationship is expansive, more than the quasi-literal of perspective. And it's not to say—it's not to put a downer on figuration. For me, the best figuration is highly abstract in the way that it deals with its items, those things that we look at in figurative paintings, versus the ways in which the best abstraction can bring us to a sense of reality that is more, that can be as real as what we see and touch around us, and hear and feel around us. And it's not that abstraction is a limitation, but it's in fact a means of getting to the point and opening oneself up to possibility.

**Rail:** There's an early Barnett Newman painting entitled *Death of Euclid* (1947). Its title is fairly unambiguous about mourning the inherited representation in the West of three-dimensional space as indicative of "The Real."



Odili Donald Odita, *Power Line*, 2003. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 109 inches. Courtesy the artist.

**Odita:** Yeah, it's so simple, right? So beautiful. I did this painting, *Powerline*, in 2003. There is this particular yellow-white line in the middle of the painting that was very significant to me at the time I was making this painting, because of the way it cut through the space. And now I look at it with some better sense of knowledge of what I did. I'm dealing with these value vibrations, and these chromatic hues, and there's a certain overall dullness or darkness in the space. When I squint and look at it, I can see that the other colors operate as a tonal space. There's an energy in the yellow-white shapes that in fact, makes them almost like flashlights in a darkened space. I thought of them simply as an electrical powerline, but I can also metaphorically go into different kinds of considerations of what this is meaning. And then on another level, I was beginning to think of these abstractions as physical spaces in a realistic sense, and so that darkened color, that brown-black shape that's in there, to me, it becomes the shattered body. So, this ripping line that gets dismembered becomes my body, or a Black body that's electrified, or body that's stretched as a result of this powerline. "Beam me up, Scotty," you know. It's particularized, it's molecularized, and it's being moved through space.

**Rail:** I'll make these anecdotal associations of my own because of the suggestion of the title. For me, in the middle of this painting there's kind of like a lag, you know. There's that weight of a powerline. But also simultaneously there's this refractory energy. An interesting tension exists between the drawing which is "weighted" in the middle and the refractory energy, when you're talking about the light in the dark room or something like that, or a diamond where one facet is refracting more light than another. So despite anecdotal illusion the indeterminacy of abstraction like this is expansive. It's not reductive to mere symbolic representation.

**Odita:** Right. I don't want it to just sit, rest still, and be predictable. Movement has always been very much a part of the work considering my sources in music, thinking of speed and time, thinking of distance, remoteness and place. When you understand the nature of the relationship between drawing and color, or drawing and painting, the simplicity of this relationship can produce so much enormity. You realize that you kind of have the world at your fingertips. This of course demands that I have to trust myself, and trust my sense of drawing, which my dad, my father, being an artist/art historian, impressed upon me. And it's everything. And so, it helps to control, and hold, and paint, and it helps to make paint and color become space. But you have to be able to understand how drawing and painting can relate to each other.

When I was working as a visiting artist in one of Robert Bordo's classes at Cooper Union, he made mention to me that Franz Kline made sketches of his paintings on Post-it paper, and then basically blew them up. So I was like, "Oh, so that's why the drawing in his painting is so awkward." Because it's just a blow up of something, rather than, "How does drawing that sits in one space work when you move the drawing over to another space?" Because the fact that painting, just like anything else, is not the same from one context to the next. Where the painting is representationally situated—as a copy for instance—does not make it the same thing. Also, as an object, if it's hung in this place, place A, and then hung in place B, it's not the same experience. So, it's to understand how things can change, and how there's a certain kind of organic, and physiological, and psychological thing that happens in each moment.

**Rail:** Most everybody inherently understands the kind of situational awareness you describe between objects and their placement. It's imprinted since infancy. Artists tend to be a bit more sensitive to the indeterminacy of the objects they create simply because they are objects "self-made" and not simply encountered as inevitable in the world. So the mutability of an object's existence is something they instinctively play with. And that contingent, moving, meaning can be then incorporated into their work.

**Odita:** Well, it's called strength, and particularly, confidence in being able to say that you can allow yourself to do something if there's a certain awareness that's imbued in that trust, that something's at stake. And that's what makes trust so righteously valuable, because you're not just saying, "Oh, I trust myself. Where's my chewing gum?" It's like, "I trust myself, and I know that I can fall off this rope doing it, but I trust myself to go across this space in any case." For instance, in this painting called *Nomad* (2012), I was really starting to restructure the way that I wanted to deal with painted space.

I thought of this as a top, middle, and bottom, and the top and the bottom kind of relate and connect to each other, and this middle portion is like a field of play. This field of play is a play, maybe of clusters, groupings, dismemberment, formations and reformations, and space within space within space within space. But the idea of "Nomad" as a title was reflective of this kind of traveling body in as much as the way in which all these spaces shift, these colors and spaces shift with no sense of apparent location within the painting. It's being able to allow that to happen versus over-determining things in advance of the experience. I think this is particularly important when you want to understand work that's not from, say, your foundation, or your space. I really dislike the way in the West that a lot of artists like Alma Thomas, Jack Whitten, Sam Gilliam, Howardena Pindell—how any of these artists, as profound as they are, in certain cases, Norman Lewis, they were taken as second-rate artists, only because the frame was Western art.

The thing is that one has to understand the context from which the person is speaking from, and the platform from which they're addressing their references. So, I cannot look at Carolee Schneemann and compare her unfavorably to let's say, Robert Morris. She has a different set of considerations that she's engaging in the work to make it what it is. And what has happened to a lot of these Black artists is that because they saw their forms, their materials, their drawing, their concepts, let's say their visual concept, their formal concepts only as, "Oh, it relates to our guys. Okay. We've seen this before." So then it's declared as second-rate, which is just totally incorrect. It would be better to ask, "What are they actually talking about? Where does this sound, visual vibration come from? How does this visual context exist within the history of America, and not in an one-note America story, but within the entire scope of America's history?"

At present there's a massive reeducation that's happening in art. Even as we see this in the ongoing protests from George Floyd's murder. There's a massive reeducation. In the least, people of all kinds are starting to reflect on George Floyd, "Oh, this guy died without mercy given to him by the police, and he has a family, and some people will miss him. Oh, he's a human being." Let's actually start to consider that Black people are human beings. Here, we can say the same thing in art, "Oh, these artists are human beings, and they have experiences that are unique to themselves as human beings." And let's try to engage those ideas to see why this thing exists as it does versus the same old, "It doesn't look like our stuff, or, it looks like the stuff that we've seen before, so it must be second rate."

**Rail:** Right. As with a painter such as Bob Thompson and his relation to the influence of Matisse, one could say that his work was "second-rate" Matisse, as you say, and by doing that simultaneously potentially deny his historical relation to that painterly progression. As if Thompson was completely unaware of that stylistic relation.

**Odita:** Thompson's color is profound, as is Stanley Whitney's unique palette. The way he explores and deals with color is unique. Same thing with Jack Whitten, for example. And that's to be seen exactly in Bob Thompson and to be understood that way. But I've



encountered certain so-called knowledgeable experts who've said, "Oh, that second-rate guy yada-yada-yada, like a Basquiat." I could not believe it.

**Rail:** Basquiat is an interesting case because of his openness to influence. One can think about Basquiat assimilating Guston and de Kooning and that's his prerogative as well. Pollock's assimilation of Siqueiros didn't necessarily make his style derivative. The question is why is the assimilation seamless if it's done by someone who's only considered within a dominant, often exclusive, narrative of influence.

**Oditia:** Yeah. It's been brought up in my work as well. The critic and curator, Stamatina Gregory wrote about it. She wrote about how I'm doing a reverse of "assimilation," by taking something back from abstraction and using abstraction to bring new possibilities, not only as reclamation, but to revitalize it in a way in which it might have been vital before, or to revitalize it in the way that it can be something different now.

**Rail:** Right? And you know that comes back to that idea of the utopian in abstraction, which can be seen as romantically retardataire: we were once believers and it's not possible anymore. Much of the imperative of Postmodernist theory is proscription against projecting a romantic subjectivity onto a utopian collectivity.

**Oditia:** I think the thing ultimately is to respect the notion that there were high stakes put into abstraction and there are high stakes put into art in general, in the progression of art, and the progression of painting. And for all of us to be able to come to a sense of the depth of painting, or the depth of art is to on one hand, understand that our relationship to monuments has changed in the way in which you see people out there now, pulling down monuments off of their pedestal. It's to say that the situation has changed. It's not to disregard the intent from the beginning up till now. But it's to see how—and this relates to an idea my dad has always told me, that tradition and those values stay alive if and when they adapt to the present, and when they become useful and still maintain use value in the present. So it's not about maintaining something just because it happened. But to find ways in which what has happened is still useful, in use and in value today.

**Rail:** Yes, basically a Dewey-like pragmatism.



Odili Donald Odita, *Great Divide*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 74 x 90 inches. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

**Odita:** This next painting is *Great Divide* from my show in 2017. Conceptually it's doing a lot of things. In a way it mirrors itself. It mirrors itself and yet breaks that idea of over-determined balance and harmony by the ways in which color shifts to basically break the framing, or break the structure of closure. And then there's this dividing line which has a certain color. It's like a red-brown color, maybe it's a space of skin, or of an idea. Maybe this is the space which makes noticeable the divide within a geography, or within a landscape. So, is it a question about modernity and the space of painting? Is this, is this brown line breaking that color space? Is it shifting, re-shifting the notion of a holistic space?

**Rail:** The title is initially very allusive. But when I look at what's happening with color, with that dividing line, I think of Josef Albers's middle color exercise—how the middle color is this kind of demilitarized zone between assimilative or contrasting colors, but it always winds up being a rather undersaturated light or dark color. Albers's formal exercises are experiential yet one can also extrapolate other meanings from them. For instance, the undersaturated color in the middle could take on political content: it simultaneously unifies and separates the two colors it mediates.

**Odita:** Albers's *Interaction of Color* is amazing to me, because it's so much about this idea of this possibility of having a better world. Because he talks about interaction, and interactivity. And that space you're talking about, that third color. What I understand and how I teach it to students, I say, you know that third color is not just a mix of one and two, it's not literal. If you're talking about painting, for instance, which is subtractive color, when you mix A with B, it breaks down, it doesn't build up, it actually breaks down and goes to gray as you mix, so it's subtractive. But to understand that that virtual third color is not just something less. It's actually unique, and it's more. So whatever A is and whatever B is, they don't have to be hetero, they don't have to be homo, they just are things separate from each other, and they in turn make a third thing.

**Rail:** Seems you are speaking to a certain conceptual dimension to that third color. In my own work I'll sometimes build in what I call a "semantic element," which functions as a "third color" acting like a qualifying foil or control element to the other colors. One of my recent paintings is titled *Control Group* (2019) in fact. Often that qualifying color is black or a very under-saturated hue.

**Odita:** That semantic void is actually very important because it implies the space of silence, you know, like Quaker spaces: you have the meetinghouse; you have that empty center. In James Turrell you have the same empty center, and in a lot of his spaces he's creating these meetinghouses for people to have that silence and contemplate together.

**Rail:** And you know there are those edges where there's a simultaneous contrast between color, or light and dark keeps that whole thing perpetually energized. The edge condition creates its own armature integral with the drawing, or *disegno*, of an image. So the relation between energy and repose, sound and silence applies to painting. Its phenomenology isn't limited to optics.

**Odita:** Yeah, and I loved that as a kid. I just loved it in comic books. I'd look for those exact transitions in comics: how the color and the drawing worked together.

**Rail:** Let's take a look at some of your installations, like this one at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007.

**Odili:** Okay, this was the space I had, positioned between the black paintings at the very end, which is Sigmar Polke, and the room just before, which contained Nancy Spéro's work. This was the transitional space, so I understood it that way. I conceived it to reflect

what I was experiencing in Venice every day during the install. So the color down below represents a type of reflection of light off the water against the arches of the wall above. The light was reflected off the water and the buildings that my family and I would see while cruising in vaporettos from one place to the next. I wanted my work to relate to our real experiences, versus an international artist's "jet-set" thing of just going to a place, hanging something off of a nail, and then leaving when the opening is done.

**Rail:** Was it important for you that those places translate to the viewer in the same way you experienced them?

**Odili:** It's important for me as a means of motivation. I use it as a way of trying to make something. The clarity of the work is not to be something like a letter, this letter equals that letter, this number equals that number. It's really about the spiritual and artistic integrity of motivation, just being able to have the reason to make something, and to plan something, and to try to make it work. That's important to me, because it makes something more real than not real for me. And choosing a specific color is just to say the same thing in another way. You wouldn't pick up any old kind of color and just throw it onto the space. It doesn't work like that, because you have different things that happen with color. If you took words from the alphabet and just started sticking them together, sometimes you might accidentally make a clear word, but in most cases you'll just have gibberish. With color, it's a matter of really understanding what you're using and its potency. And the gaming of this work is always about that.

It's very real for me to ask myself, "What's my motivation here?" It's about having a sense of import within myself, a sense of clarity within myself to be able to communicate, and not necessarily letting myself rely only on old tricks, but to use what I know to make something new. And the new is not literally form. It could be the way in which I made the form, and the way in which the form allows me to understand something deeper about form, or the way in which form allows me to understand something deeper about content or motivation, and so forth. It's about pushing myself, and that's the ambition that I believe is inherent in the abstraction project, and to what I think the abstraction project is all about; the ambition to be able to reach the center of the mind at the same time as the center of the world, and speak about it.

**Rail:** What about this other installation, done in Philadelphia in 2008–2009?



Odili Donald Odita, *Third Space*, 2008. Acrylic latex wall paint on wall. Ramp Space Project at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, September 4, 2008–December, 2009. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

**Odita:** This is *Third Space* at the ICA, at the University of Pennsylvania. And this is a uniquely interesting painting, because you have the painting in this very tall, vertical, narrow, hall space. And all this shifting within the painting is to talk about the shifting of movement in the space. Yet, from another vantage point it becomes a traditional painting, in the sense that you can see everything at once from a single perspective. One has to stand across the street and look at the building to get this view. So, the shifting context of body space in relationship to this installation was profoundly significant to me in my understanding of what's possible.

**Rail:** And there's a similar kind of value interplay, as in your paintings, between something that's in shadow and something that's in light. So there's a dialogue between the installations and the standalone paintings that extends their respective boundaries.

**Odita:** In fact, my color in my canvas paintings became better after the installations. I had this initial prejudice with color, which I think is really important to understand. When we want to assign too much meaning at the beginning, we can limit things, and hence, we don't allow them to become whatever is outside of our mind. So, I was making paintings that represented a so-called African color. Over time and through the installation work, that notion became the most ridiculous thing I could ever imagine doing. It's not that the work before failed, but I've understood that there's no classification that can be put to color that says, this is Japanese color versus American color. You might have states that have flags, and they use colors, and you might have countries that have flags that use color, but that's not to say that this represents that space, or that thing. Then I started to realize that any color is African color. You just have to be able to go beyond these preconditions that limit your thinking. It's another aspect of undoing my education. I had good teachers, but if I talk about white supremacy in the systemic nature of knowledge in the West, I'm going to say that my whole practice is about going beyond that. That's what all this protest is about. We're not only going beyond white supremacy or male fascism, we're going into the space beyond these determinants, maybe even beyond the limits of language itself.

**Rail:** I think that's a great point. And I believe you're describing the political dimension and potential of abstraction. Of course in the past, formalist abstraction has been alloyed with retrograde or even fascist ideology—aspects of how the accelerationist utopia of the Futurists lined up with Mussolini's rhetoric, for example—but it is more often associated with emancipatory narratives.

**Odita:** Politics in abstract art, or in art in general, can still exist in a way which not only represents some ideal or idealism, but also in ways in which it projects the force of its form. I'm interested in looking at things of that nature, because it's about understanding, or responding actually, to sheer power—and understanding how it imagines itself.

**Rail:** I'd like to talk about one last installation. It looks as if there was a performance involved with it?



Odili Donald Odita, *RISE*, 2015. Acrylic latex paint on wall. Commission for Ezra Stiles College, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

**Odita:** Yes, this is a piece I did in the commons room at Yale University, Ezra Stiles College in 2015. This picture shows a really beautiful performance to inaugurate the piece. And these images show the social dynamic that's occurring with the wall installations, how they're being used by people, and how people are activating them and they're becoming something else: not just a background, inasmuch as how the energy of the work inspires people, and conversely, how people reflect back the energy in the painting. There's a back and forth dialogue that's happening within the space.

**Rail:** This was conceived as a collaboration with this performance group?



**Odita:** I was surprised. I didn't know this would happen. These were students from Yale. They were members of an acapella group called Shades of Yale that performs music from the African diaspora. They wanted to perform in front of this wall. This wall painting was very important for the school, because it is part of the change at Yale to engage more people of color in projects like this on their campus. It is the university's way of working against some of the histories of whiteness that permeate that institution, and bringing something more reflective of the changing student population at the school.



Odili Donald Odita, *Shadow and Light (for Julian Francis Abele)*, 2015. Acrylic latex paint on wall, Dimensions vary. Commission for the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

A similar event occurred in front of my piece *Shadow and Light* (2015) at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. A dancer unknown to me performing in front of the piece. The installation is in part a commemoration to Julian Francis Abele, an architect who was the primary designer of the West Campus of Duke University (from 1925–1954), but was never able to see those buildings in completion due to Jim Crow laws at the time in the United States. In 1986, there were ongoing protests by students at Duke to have the university divest from apartheid South Africa. A student sent a letter of outrage to the editor of the school paper, stating that the architect of beautiful campus buildings would feel so dishonored by all these protests happening in front of them. Ironically, it was Julian Francis Abele's grandniece, Susan Cook, who was attending Duke at the time, and wrote the letter that publicly acknowledged Abele's architectural role at the university, stating that he would have been proud of the protests for change. As a student, Julian Francis Abele was class president of the Architectural Society at the University of Pennsylvania, and was the first African-American to graduate from the Graduate School of Fine Arts. He would later contribute to the designs of more than 400 buildings, including the Widener Memorial Library at Harvard University (1912–1915), the Central Branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia (1917–1927), and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1914–1928). The title of my wall painting, *Shadow and Light*, refers to how Abele had lived for so long in the shadows of history, yet through struggle and eventual understanding, he has since been carried out again into the light of day.

# HYPERALLERGIC

October 3, 2020  
By John Yau

## An Abstract Painter Defines a Space of His Own

In his clashing compositions and use of artificial colors and materials Odita generates something very different from artists associated with geometric abstraction and Minimalism.



Odili Donald Odita, "Another Space" (2019), acrylic on canvas, 84 x 108 inches (© Odili Donald Odita, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York).

In a 2009 interview with Ian Sternthal, publisher of Sternthal Books, Odili Donald Odita made the following statement about his work:

The paintings you referred to do indeed incorporate a triangular geometric formation that is African in origin and conceptual in intention. A triangular block of color starts from one point, incrementally expanding as it reaches the other end of the canvas. The motif expresses the mathematics of infinity — two lines that never really touch, expanding towards infinity and beyond. [...] The triangular shapes stacked above and below, constantly repeating. This idea came to me from staring at the computer screen, as well as the cinematic screen. [...] This idea of the edge and beyond — the edge and within — was something that I began applying towards my understanding of the Western world's boundaries, in relation to the surrounding "peripheral" areas.

In this statement, Odita connects a geometric shape that originates in Africa with the mathematical conception of infinity, the digital screen, and a Eurocentric conception of what is central and peripheral in importance.

The fluidity of Odita's expansive thinking runs counter to the reductive conceptual models employed by artists he has often been associated with, from Frank Stella to Kenneth Noland to Peter Halley. His inclusive approach extends to his palette, about which he has said: "In my process, I cannot make a color twice — it can only appear to be the same."



Odili Donald Odita, "Echo" (2019), acrylic latex paint on aluminum-core fabricated wood panel with reconstituted wood veneer, 92 x 52 x 1 3/4 inches (© Odili Donald Odita, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York).

The cacophonously colored, interlocking, scalene triangles one sees in many of the paintings in Odita's current exhibition, [Odili Donald Odita: Mirror](#) at Jack Shainman Gallery (September 10–October 31) reflect his statement as they encompass this African form, found in textiles and on painted clay walls of homes in West Africa, along with the accelerated motion of hyperspace, past, and future.

This imaginative melding draws on other aspects of the artist's life, including learning to paint flat shapes from his father, Emmanuel Odita, who was part of the Zaria Arts Society, a modernist Nigerian art movement, as well as coming with his family to America as an infant, and going on to write for *Flash Art International* and *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* about Black artists such as Frank Bowling and Stanley Whitney in the 1990s, after graduating from Bennington College with an MFA in 1990.



Odili Donald Odita, "Fire" (2019), acrylic latex paint on aluminum-core fabricated wood panel with reconstituted wood veneer, 92 x 52 inches (© Odili Donald Odita, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York).



It seems to me that Odita's deep and complex relationship with Africa shares something with Wilfredo Lam, who grew up in Cuba and had firsthand experience with Yoruba rituals and practices, and Martin Puryear, who was a member of the Peace Corps and worked in Sierra Leone, West Africa, from 1964 to '66, where he learned various indigenous crafts regarding wood joinery.

Through their direct experience with African spiritual and craft practices, Lam and Puryear gained a different understanding of the relationship of these practices to Western culture from that of their white counterparts. Their experience also helps explain why neither of these artists elected to fit into the movements of their time, Surrealism and Post-Minimalism. Instead, each followed a distinct trajectory that rejected key attitudes of Western aesthetics, such as appropriation and fabrication.

I feel similarly about Odita's work. All the connections that have been made between his abstractions and the hard-edged paintings of Stella, Noland, or Bridget Riley, and geometric abstraction and Op Art strike me as superficial, at best. Odita's work addresses a deeper issue, the foundation and inherent biases of the Western painting tradition.

In his clashing compositions and use of artificial colors and materials — for instance, reconstituted wood veneer, whose design can be determined by a computer — Odita generates something very different from artists associated with geometric abstraction and Minimalism. By exposing clearly demarcated areas of the patterned, defect-free veneer and avoiding a symmetrical, all-over pattern with his geometric shapes, he distinguishes himself from artists who allied themselves with a Western Eurocentric aesthetic that often took its cues from Clement Greenberg and similar gatekeepers.



Odili Donald Odita, "Dark Angel" (2020), acrylic latex paint on aluminum-core fabricated wood panel with reconstituted wood veneer, 92 x 52 inches (© Odili Donald Odita, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York).

He has developed an unstable, unpredictable opticality, and referenced his own heritage in African shapes, further updating, as well as reconfiguring, non-Western art to produce what we might call postmodern painting. Odita is nothing if not thorough in defining a painting space that is all his own.

In "Dark Angel" (2020), Odita overlays a black wood veneer ground with two bands of equal width spanning the painting from its top to bottom edge. The placing of the bands gives the black veneer, with its whitish striations, equal prominence. Each band is divided into sharply tapering scalene triangles, all of which are painted a different color. The edge of the band's tightly painted skin presses up against the wood veneer's textured surface.

On each side of the black wood veneer that defines the central axis of the painting, the interior facing sides of the bands seem to mirror each other, starting with a swiftly narrowing yellow triangle descending from the top edge. As we move across each band to the outer edges, the mirroring of shape and color stops abruptly. At the same time, we are likely to discern that the colors in each band don't exactly match those in the other band.



Installation view, *Odili Donald Odita: Mirror*, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY, September 10–October 31

As with the other paintings in the exhibition, I kept refocusing my attention, especially regarding similarity and difference. From velvety dark veneer marked by contrasting striations to the wild array colors not found in nature, Odita's paintings revel in their luxuriousness and exuberance, while also acknowledging such sources as the mass-produced paneling one might see in a playroom, den, or inexpensive restaurant.

The wood veneer is both a thing and a flawless substitute for a more expensive and exotic wood. At the same time, formally speaking, the painted bands and black wood veneer vie for attention, with neither conceding to the other. "Dark Angel" is a figure-ground painting, which is another feature that distinguishes it from Western abstraction, particularly minimalism and geometric abstraction. Each of the bands is defined by a distinct clustering together of different colored, sharp-edged geometric shapes. The color of the shapes changes both tonally and starkly, with no discernible logic. Although they shared some colors and their shapes were from the same family, I could detect no underlying order connecting the two bands. They are as different as they are similar, a visual paradox that this viewer found captivating.

In addition to his incorporation of a shape that is African in origin, another influence on Odita's work seems to be bebop, a style of jazz that developed in the early 1940s, coinciding with the rise of Abstract Expressionism and the general move toward abstraction in art. What the artist's use of color and geometry shares with bebop are rapid chord changes and improvisation within an established structure.



Odili Donald Odita, "Blackbird" (2020), acrylic latex paint on aluminum-core fabricated wood panel with reconstituted wood veneer, 92 x 52 inches (© Odili Donald Odita, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Odita has transformed Pattern and Decoration's lulling comforts and Op Art's underlying reliance on order, as well as geometric abstraction and Minimalism, into something unstable, unpredictable, and, most importantly, pleasurably enthralling. He has done so by connecting himself with a tradition that the Western Eurocentric art world has treated as peripheral and to be colonized. His synthesis of reconstituted wood veneer, a vast array of colors, and a vocabulary inspired by both African art and digital graphics amounts to a major achievement, equal in abstraction to what Kerry James Marshall has achieved in figurative painting and the reimagining of American history and art.

[Odili Donald Odita: Mirror](#) continues at Jack Shainman Gallery (513 West 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 31.

# LADUE NEWS

## **Laumeier and Jeske Sculpture Parks Display Unifying Exhibition**

Bryan Hollerbach  
Sep 17, 2020



photo courtesy of Laumeier Sculpture Park

Laumeier Sculpture Park recently launched “From Periphery to Center,” an exuberant new free exhibition commissioned from artist Odili Donald Odita.



The exhibition, which opened Aug. 8, runs till Dec. 20 in a unique tandem

presentation. More specifically, because it seeks “to forge connections between north and south St. Louis County,” according to a press release from Laumeier, the exhibition involves two sites: Laumeier proper, the 105-acre open-air gem in Sunset Hills, and 7-acre Jeske Sculpture Park in Ferguson.

Odita’s “From Periphery to Center” takes the form of flags, whose varicolored vivacity may well recall Chinese tangrams, the object mechanism of a kaleidoscope or particularly kinky stained glass. Five flags grace Laumeier, while 10 grace Jeske.

Laumeier’s press release describes the exhibition as “a meditation on similarities and difference, bonds and divisions” and notes that the artist took particular interest “in the conversations on inequity and social justice that ensued after the [Aug. 9, 2014] killing of Michael Brown by police, which brought local conditions and events to national and international attention.”

It continues that with “From Periphery to Center,” the artist wishes “to address the idea that concepts of periphery and center are subjective and changing, and that events do not cease to make [a] significant impact when they occur outside of a broader horizon of attention.”

Laumeier curator Dana Turkovic details what inspired the exhibition from Odita (born in Nigeria but nowadays based in Philadelphia).

“Odili was part of an exhibition I curated last year, but he has shown in St. Louis a number of times, so he has a familiarity with our city,” Turkovic states. “While doing research for *that* exhibition, I became aware of a piece he did for [the citywide contemporary art triennial] Prospect New Orleans working with the flags.

“I liked how Odili’s project there looked at geography and place with an expansive view, asking the audience to travel to each site. I also responded to the translation of his approach to painting to a public art practice, using his research to create a composition that was layered with meaning and about history and place.”

Turkovic also explains the commission’s evolution: “I think Odili really expanded the project in terms of the amount of flags he designed for the project, and he really thought through each design, both conceptually and formally” – especially the flags’ placement relative to other works and the surrounding landscape, for a potentially new and surprising experience of a given space.

Otherwise, Turkovic discusses a visitor’s potential “takeaway” from the exhibition, aesthetically or otherwise, and enthuses about collaborating with Jeske.

“I think with Odili’s work for ‘From Periphery to Center,’ one of his hopes – and ours – is that each installation within the context of a sculpture park can be a place for conversation and dialogue,” she says. “Odili’s combination of abstraction and public sculpture sets the tone for universal interpretation.

“Also, it’s exciting to work with another park with a similar mission and to expand the footprint of an exhibition. The collaboration with Jeske invites and encourages visitors to experience the [metro area] in a much bigger way and to travel to areas they may not have been to or haven’t been to in a long time.”



photo courtesy of Laumeier Sculpture Park

Finally, given that the pandemic has caused many area residents to limit travel, Turkovic calls this “the perfect time to get to know your own city and to really explore it geographically and historically,” adding that, in that respect, “Odili’s multisite installation becomes about *much* more than the objects themselves.”

*Laumeier Sculpture Park, 12580 Rott Road, St. Louis, 314-615-5278, **laumeier.org***

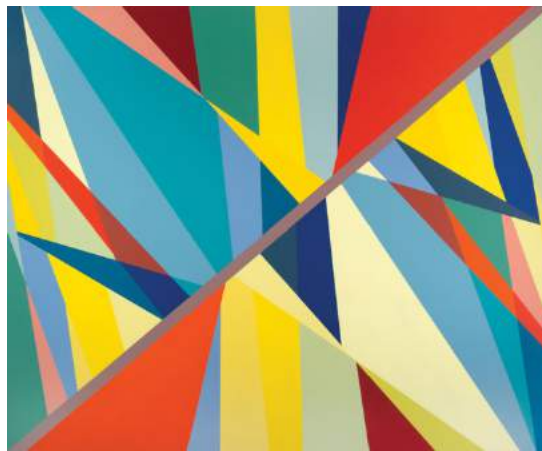
*Jeske Sculpture Park, 211 Thoroughman Ave., Ferguson, 314-521-4661,  
**jeskesculpturepark.com***

# Art in America

REVIEWS Mar 1, 2018

## Odili Donald Odita

NEW YORK  
at Jack Shainman  
by [Re'al Christian](#)



Odili Donald Odita: *Great Divide*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 74 by 90 1/4 inches; at Jack Shainman.

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

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

Especially striking are the ways in which Odita's colors seem to both complement and resist one another. In contrasting soft hues with hard lines and piercing dark shapes, the artist creates not only movement but ambiguous space into which his colors seem infinitely to extend. Ranging in scale from small to larger than life, the paintings in the main gallery produced an array of effects. In *Place* (2018), a rectangle of horizontal, angled shapes in a dark, muted palette energizes a background of brilliantly hued vertical wedges. *Great Divide* (2017) is bisected diagonally by a



thin, gray band that essentially acts as a visual ellipsis in the brightly colored composition. In three paintings on wood—*Van Gogh's Trees*(2016), *Time Machine* (2016), and the show's title work (2017)—Oditia has left large portions of the support exposed. The wood's texture offsets the flatness of the acrylic and adds dimension, while its natural hue serves as a foil for the bold paint.

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

# INTERIOR DESIGN®

March 2020

edited by **Annie Block**

## shades of meaning

"I cannot make a color twice." This statement comes from Odili Donald Odita, whose energetic, abstract paintings have sociopolitical references. In fact, he was recently commissioned to create a large mural for the Ford Foundation Center for Social Justice in New York. He goes on to say: "I'm asking the viewer to look into themselves and reflect upon the consequence of actions relating to gender and identity." Odita is referring to "Mirror," his upcoming spring exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery, across town from the FFCSJ. The show is composed of a new body of work of over a dozen paintings he's done from 2018 to this year, some nearly 8 feet tall. But all utilize color and pattern as a commentary on the complexity of the world—and the human condition.



**Clockwise from top left:** Mirror 2, a 52-inch-high acrylic and latex on wood by Odili Donald Odita, appears in the artist's solo exhibition at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery, April 2 to May 9. His acrylic on canvas Flower, Dukes of Hazard in acrylic-latex wall paint on wood panel, Nka, his acrylic latex on aluminum-core fabricated wood panel with reconstituted wood veneer. The acrylic on canvas Another Space.



**DESIGN**wire

COURTESY OF ODILI DONALD ODITA AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

# Robb Report

April 10, 2020  
By Julie Belcove

## 16 Contemporary Artists Respond to the Covid-19 Crisis With Poignant New Works

In an exclusive Robb Report portfolio, Rashid Johnson, Avery Singer, Richard Tuttle and other acclaimed artists share the work they've made while isolating.

With the world shutting down and waiting out the deadly scourge of Covid-19 in our living rooms as if trapped in a bad sci-fi flick, *Robb Report* asked some of the most compelling contemporary artists working today for their take on these eerie, unprecedented times. Some poignantly expressed the existential fear and anxiety that have become a near-universal emotional state, while others found beauty in nature, joy in maintaining connection at a distance or humanity in the simple but profound act of creating.

### Odili Donald Odita: 'Untitled' (2020)

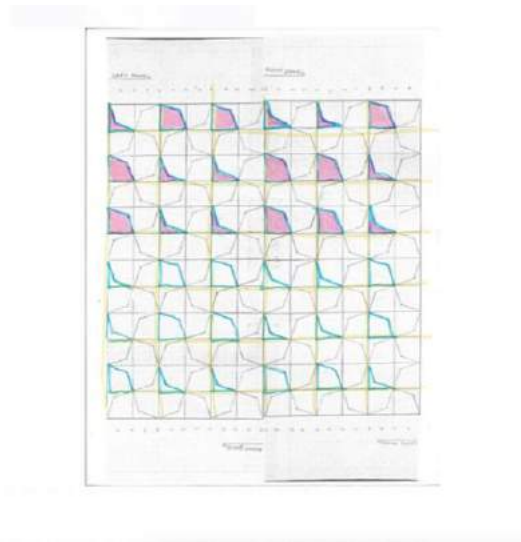


PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

"The drawing represents a rupture in continuity. I want this drawing to convey what it feels like to have a stop in flow or a halt within a process. This moment is the blink that exists without time; it can last a second and, in this case, for days and months.

"Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, my exhibition has been postponed. For me, this decision respects both the unprecedented threat of our time and the time and energy that I put into making my new body of paintings.

"In the end, it is all about the audience. I understood what I would have lost without this—that special energy found in the dialogue between the artist and their audience, which becomes realized in an immediate present."

## Odili Donald Odita Murals

Special Commission

August 18, 2015 – July 28, 2019

### Commissions Celebrating a Decade

As part of Nasher10, a celebration of the first decade and beyond, the Nasher Museum commissioned two large-scale murals by abstract painter Odili Donald Odita. His wall painting inside the Nasher Museum's Mary D.B.T. Semans Great Hall, *Shadow and Light (For Julian Francis Abele)*, is inspired by the African-American architect who designed most of Duke's campus. (<https://spotlight.duke.edu/abele/>) Odita's wall painting visually connects the Nasher Museum to downtown Durham, where he painted a second mural on the Foster Street wall of the Downtown Durham YMCA, 218 W. Morgan Street. That painting, entitled *Time Bridge*, was inspired by the city of Durham, which is, according to the artist, "a city that has an awareness of the complexity of its individual interests, and at the same time is open to allow those interests to thrive together as a community." *Time Bridge* is a temporary exhibition, on view through summer 2019.



Odita was born in 1966 in Enugu, Nigeria, and lives and works in Philadelphia. His abstract paintings explore ways to trigger memory and address the human condition through color, pattern and design.

"We were very proud to bring Odili Donald Odita to Duke to kick off the celebration of our amazing first decade and the decades to come," said Sarah Schroth, Mary D.B.T. and James H. Semans Director of the Nasher Museum. "His beautiful, abstract wall paintings demonstrate a rare use of color and pattern executed through a rigorous process. Odita's colors reflect his vision from his travels around the world. His painting inside the museum will visually connect with a monumental wall painting in downtown Durham, symbolizing our enthusiastic commitment to the community."

Both of Odita's mural projects inspired educational initiatives and public programs that have strengthened the museum's ties to Duke and the community in new ways.

In a partnership with Durham School of the Arts, the Nasher Museum created Nasher Teens, a group of high school art students who served as tour guides and educated the public about Odita and his murals.





Odili Donald Odita, *Time Bridge*, 2015. Acrylic latex paint on wall, dimensions variable. Commissioned by the Nasher Museum of at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, New York. © Odili Donald Odita.



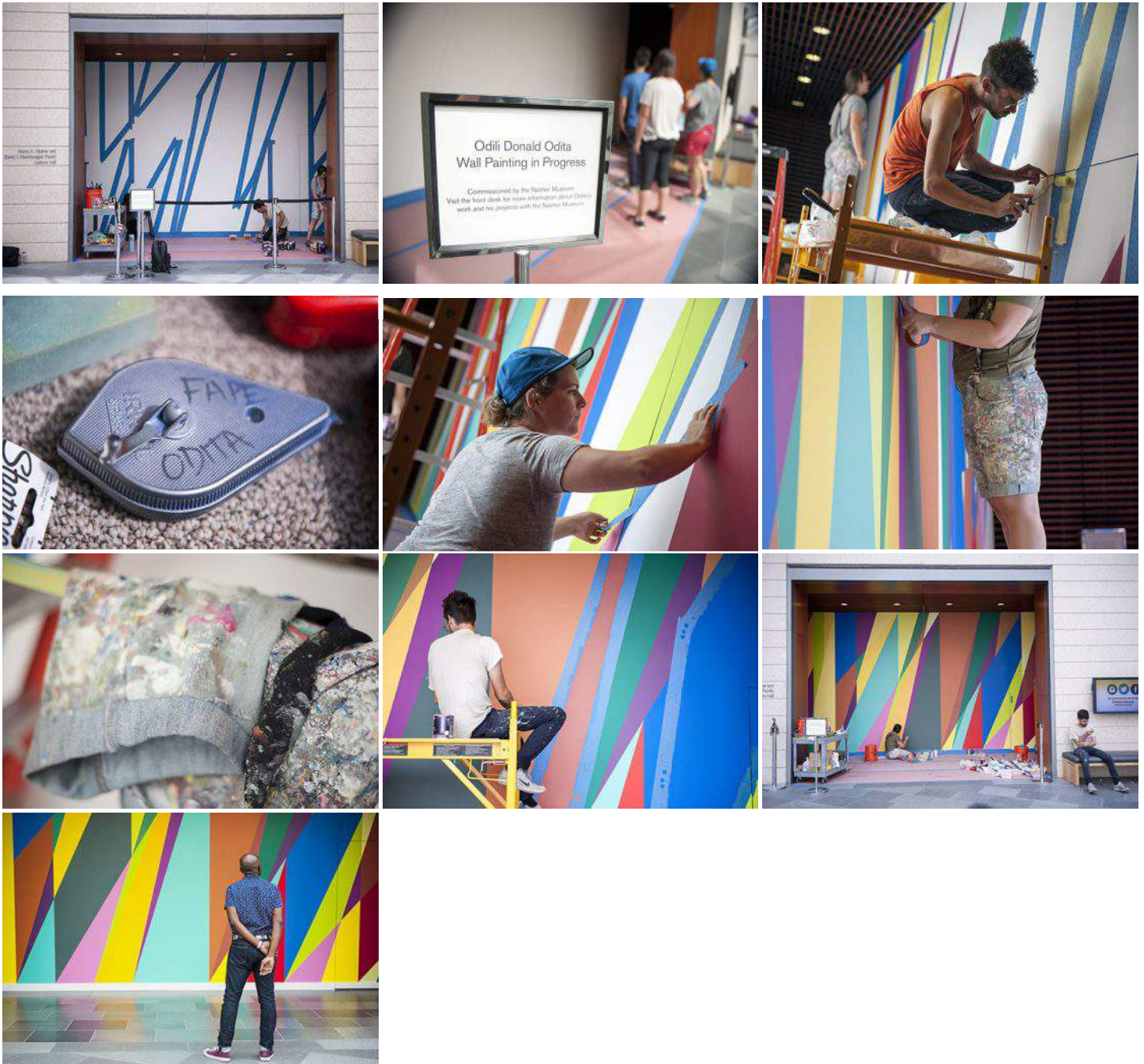
(<https://nasher.duke.edu/stories/mural-durham/>)

## Mural Durham

The Mural Durham (<http://www.muraldurham.com/>) living archive was inspired by a series of mural tours in downtown Durham created by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, in partnership with Preservation ...

November 30, 2018





## The Making of a Mural

Visiting artist Odili Donald Odita, with three painting assistants, created the wall painting "Shadow and Light (For Julian Francis Abele)" at the Nasher Museum over the course of three weeks during the summer of 2015.

*"With this installation, I wish to pay attention to the various qualities of action and event in color in the way that Mr. Abele's highly tuned attention to historical detail and his fine sense of texture elevated his grand designs at Duke. In tandem, the wall painting will utilize a constant and continual push of figure-ground relationships where forms live and breathe in direct affirmation to their immediate surrounding."*

— Odili Donald Odita

## Bicycle Mural Tours

Watch this video about bicycle tours of murals in downtown Durham, including the wall mural by Odili Donald Odita at the Downtown Durham YMCA. The tours are co-organized by Preservation Durham, the Museum of Durham History and the Nasher Museum. Docents lead the 90-minute tours, which include about 13 murals and take place on fourth Saturdays, May through November.

### Artist's Statement

In title and concept, this work is made in gesture and commemoration to architect Julian Francis Abele. Until events in 1986, there was little knowledge of Julian Francis Abele's direct hand in designing most of the campus of Duke University as chief designer of the Philadelphia-based Horace Trumbauer architectural firm. In 1902, Julian Francis Abele was the first African American to earn a degree in architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Fine Arts, and received many prizes during his studies including being elected class president of the school's Architectural Society in his senior year at the university.

In 1906, Julian Abele was hired by Horace Trumbauer to join his architectural firm based on Trumbauer's notice of Abele's award winning work at the University of Pennsylvania. By 1909, Abele became the firm's chief designer. In his capacity as chief designer, Abele would design over 250 buildings, including Harvard University's Widener Memorial Library, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Philadelphia's Free Library. Tobacco millionaire James Buchanan Duke was a Trumbauer client (they built his residences in New York City and in Somerville, NJ) and would later hire the firm in 1924 to transform and expand upon an existing college in Durham that become Duke University. Abele had his hand in designing most of Duke, including its library, the football stadium, gym, medical school, religion school, hospital, faculty houses, the Cameron Indoor Stadium and Duke Chapel.

Surprisingly, it was a letter to the student newspaper in 1986, written by Susan Cook, a Duke student and a great-grandniece of Julian Abele, that brought light to Abele's central role in designing Duke University.

Duke students were infuriated by the school's investments in (apartheid South Africa), and built shanties in front of the university's winsome stone chapel, which was modeled after England's Canterbury Cathedral. A student wrote an editorial for the college paper complaining about the shacks, which she said violated "our rights as students to a beautiful campus."

Susan Cook wrote in to the student newspaper contending that Abele would have supported the divestment rally in front of his beautiful chapel. Her great grand-uncle "was a victim of apartheid in this country" yet the university itself was an example "of what a black man can create given the opportunity." Cook asserted that Abele had created their splendid campus, but had never set foot on it due to the Jim Crow laws of the segregated South.[1]

*Shadow and Light* makes reference to this conditionality of Julian Abele's history at Duke University. His was a story placed in the shadow of history based on the values of an American culture at that time. Through a circumstantial moment of strife coupled with familial will, Abele's full legacy at Duke University again saw the light of day. With this installation, I wish to pay attention to the various qualities of action and event in color in the way that Mr. Abele's highly tuned attention to historical detail and his fine sense of texture elevated his grand designs at Duke. In tandem, the wall painting will utilize a constant and continual push of figure-ground relationships where forms live and breathe in direct affirmation to their immediate surrounding.

Odili Donald Odita  
Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University  
July 31, 2015.



# ARTNEWS

## 9 Art Events to Attend in New York City This Week

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

### Opening: Odili Donald Odita at Jack Shainman Gallery

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

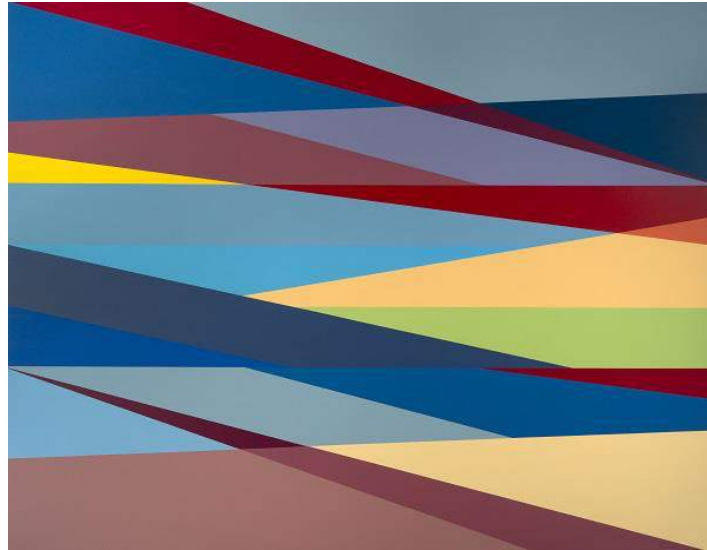
*Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, 6–8 p.m.*





## Odili Donald Odita at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

BY BLOUIN ARTINFO | JANUARY 23, 2018



Odili Donald Odita. X, 2018. acrylic on canvas. 74 1/8 x 159 x 1 1/2 inches  
(Courtesy: Odili Donald Odita and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Jack Shainman Gallery is hosting an exhibition “Third Sun” by artist [Odili Donald Odita](#) at the gallery’s 20th street location in New York.

The exhibition presents a series of new paintings by Philadelphia-based African American abstract painter Odili Donald Odita (b.1966, Enugu, Nigeria), who is being represented by the gallery for the fifth time in a solo. An M.F.A. from Bennington College in Vermont, Odita’s practice explores color from the figurative historical context as well as from the socio-political point of view, enunciating pragmatically about Africa and its rich culture. The artist has been commissioned for numerous large-scale wall installations including the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program in 2015; George C. Young Federal Building and Courthouse in Orlando, Florida in 2013; United States Mission to the United Nations in New York in 2011; and most recently at the Newark Museum in 2017. His works have been subject to a host of exhibitions in the USA and abroad, including in the 52nd Venice Biennale exhibition “Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind”, where Odita’s large installation “Give Me Shelter” was featured prominently in 2007.

The exhibition pivots on two prominent themes- celebration and subjectivity. While the artist attempts to express the idea of celebration as a performative element for freedom, he also investigates the expression of resistance as a counter-force against anything that holds the potential to dampen this sentiment whatsoever. The artist believes that celebration is integral to forming and shaping the identity of people within cultures, which augments in the

acknowledgement of existence of any entity. On the context of current global socio-political environment, where marginality and abomination has taken precedence over humanity, the artist advocates the scope for hope for mankind through the mode of celebration.

*The exhibition is on view through February 10, 2018 at Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street New York, New York 10011.*

*For details, visit <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/galleryguide/jack-shainman-gallery/overview>*

*Click on the slideshow for a sneak peek at the exhibition.*

# Forbes

FEB 10, 2016

## Artist Odili Donald Odita Emphasizes Human Discrepancies Through Color and Lines at Jack Shainman

Adam Lehrer, CONTRIBUTOR

Nigerian-born and Philadelphia-based artist Odili Donald Odita's work presents a fascinating dichotomy and works in two distinct but complimentary ways. In one sense, they are beautiful, bright, and colorful efforts of fabulous design, once described by Janet Koplos as "[showstoppers](#)" in Art in America . His large-scale abstract paintings are beautiful and utterly impossible to dismiss. But once the painting has you, its rich use of colors and meticulously designed and drawn lines speak to you. There is a message and a story within the work. Employing a technique he describes as "thought-provoking colors," Donald believes that all colors form personal associations. Through the contrast of colors, a narrative can be formed, much in the same way as Jazz music uses contrasting notes to thread a mood and a story. "What does this color remind you of," Odita asks. "Did you ever see that color somewhere and what were the circumstances surrounding that encounter? What did it make you think and what did you feel?"

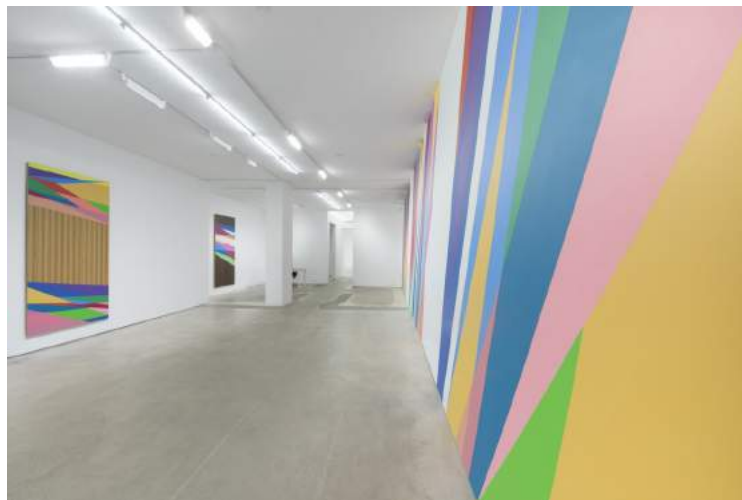


*The Velocity of Change, 2015, acrylic latex wall paint, image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery*

Odita was more or less destined to become an artist, having formed a powerful relationship to fine art as a youth through conversations with his father, a fellow artist. After receiving his MFA from [Bennington College](#) in 1990, Odita entered the art world as both an artist and a critic, writing for [Flash Art International](#) and other publications and interviewing future peers such as Frank Bowling and Stanley Whitney. Since 2006, he has shared his approach with young art students as Associate Professor of Painting at Tyler School of Art. Through his work as a teacher, a critic, and an artist, Donald formed a unique approach to art: equal parts conceptual and spiritual, in a sense.

Odita's most recent exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery, *The Velocity of Change* (ended January 31), continued his quest to explore humanity through patterns, structure, and design. Always interested in the African history of textiles, Odita uses color to emphasize the "complexity of the world." "I cannot make a color twice – it can only appear to be the same," says Odita in a quote from the gallery. "This is important to me because it highlights the specificity of differences that exist in the world of people and things."

Odita possesses one of those wonderfully absorbent artist minds that make conversation with him fascinating. Though he is soft-spoken and deeply considerate, he presents absolute conviction in his work and his ideas. He can espouse critical and conceptual art theory and abstract politics in the same breadth as expressing his love for John Coltrane, David Bowie, and comic books. Odita took the time to speak with me about his last exhibition, his conceptual practice, Jazz music, the death of David Bowie, and the narrative possibilities within color.



*The Velocity of Change, 2015, acrylic latex wall paint, image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery*

Forbes: Do you think that your time as an art critic informed your conceptual practice at all, or that you are more in tune with art history and where you see yourself in it?

Odita: I think it's a combination of teaching for a number of years and my own background. My dad was an artist. My conceptual practice also developed through educating artists, writing about art, and focusing on my own art.

Forbes: You've discussed the ideas of self versus institution, how a sense of self can be almost false. Are you at all trying to point that out?

Odita: Yeah, most definitely. Media and institution inform us all, and we try to achieve a sense of self. At one point I wanted to use African colors when I was painting and talk about Africa. I know now that that is the most ridiculous idea because how do you define that? Like, American colors? There is the American flag, but another country might use a similar palette for their flag. It's really about understanding how we renew and re-imagine ourselves in the world in a way so that we reach our full potentials. We just have to understand how things are very specific: time, geography, and location. There is no absolute.



*Chasm (2015), acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery*

Forbes: I know you were at first very interested in the African history of textiles, and things of that nature, but your conceptual practice grew more political and more abstract. Did you always have a political aim?

Odita: The political intent was always there, but they grew. In the late '80s I was looking at the work of artists like Peter Halley and Jeff Koons, and the politics relative to commodity. But I've always liked artists like Agnes Martin, as well, but they were more about the politics of self that came out of abstract expressionism. It's more about a choice running counter to something else or how you'd like to live life: "I don't want to consume," or "I want to be with nature."

On that level, it was there. I dealt more specifically with institutional politics and racism in the late '80s and '90s, and was living in New York in the '90s and experiencing the whole world of identity politics that defined the city at that time.

Forbes: I know you're very into music, and I can certainly see a connection to music in the spectrum of colors you use and the variety of stories you tell. You can take Jazz music, for instance, and guys like Coltrane, Sun Ra, and Albert Ayler were able to tell amazing stories



without ever uttering a word, just using a spectrum of tones. Is that a connection you strive for in fine art?

Odita: Absolutely, I love that. I went to Bennington College and studied with Bill Dixon there, he had a jazz class where we would just listen to records.



*First Light (2015), acrylic latex on panel, image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery*

Forbes: Wow that must have been an amazing class!

Odita: Yeah, it was intense (laughs). He would teach us how to really listen and realize things like, “This guy is making the sound of chickens from the coop where he grew up, or the sound of traffic.” I was recently talking to a friend about late Coltrane. I told him I didn’t get it. He told me to listen to North African snake charmer music, not Indian. I listened to that and went, “Oh my god,” if you know anything about this music it’s all about calming the beast. That is totally what he was talking about [in the music]. This was the music Trane made when he stopped using drugs and wanted to enter into a calmer frame of mind.

Forbes: It was *A Love Supreme* when he first got off heroin?

Odita: Yeah. I’m also really obsessed with David Bowie having passed away. I was shocked going online and realizing how many people LOVED his music. In all these obituaries I read about how this guy helped people embrace the strange within them and to nurture and utilize it. That’s music: an emotional and an intellectual way to tap into your spirit.



*Other World (2015), acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery*

Forbes: I've read you often using the phrase, "thought provoking colors." How do you identify thought provoking colors, is it intuitive?

Odita: Like most things, it's intuitive. I teach a class called "Color Theory" and try to explain to students that color is connected to your personal association and experience with it. I present a situation asking my students what they would feel if men that were wearing orange suits and masks ran into this room. What would you feel and think seeing that situation? Color can create these situations that trigger memories. Same thing if you smell steak and your stomach rumbles if you're hungry. Color is a sense, which means it triggers a physiological reaction.

Forbes: Right, when you mentioned men in orange jumpsuits I started thinking about ET and Elliot being quarantined. So I start thinking of false imprisonment and isolation. And you have these memories and you know that they trigger something.

Odita: Yeah and then that trigger becomes a part of your history and memories.



*Fissure (2015), acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery*

Forbes: It certainly works in music, too. I'll hear a Ghostface Killah song and I immediately think of being stoned in my 1994 Corolla in high school with my buddies.

Odita: (Laughs) Exactly.

Forbes: In [BOMB Magazine](#), you said you consider your work of part of a tradition and an aesthetic. Let's say that it is the aesthetic espoused by Stanley Whitney and others. Was that a goal? Or did you identify with the aesthetic early on.

Odita: If somebody seriously wants to be a painter than it's always a goal to be seen as being able to hang with the big guys and to be a part of a tradition. It's really rewarding to be seen in the same sphere as those you admired. You realize you're working towards that space, but it can be scary to worry about seeming important. If musicians came in thinking they were great and they were only going to make great songs, they won't make a good song. You have to learn to play to be part of a canon.

Forbes: There is has to be some sense of insecurity to make anything of substance.

Odita: You want to push yourself to be better than yourself. That is art.

Forbes: Your paintings to me have a dual quality. They have this relation to the environment and they are very noticeable for their bright rich use of culture, but if any single piece catches your attention for any amount of time it draws you into considering the piece conceptually. Looking for a story. It's almost like design meets concept.

Odita: Absolutely. The design thing really comes into play when I consider Italian drawing. Design is drawing. I love Renaissance works and African art and sculptures and I'm looking at the drawings and the significance of these lines. I create these compositions to intensify a relation to space. You even see it in writing when a really strong passage has a sense of space to carry the body into it. The space has to be strong enough to carry the

body into it.

Forbes: Your work appears to have narrative despite its abstraction. Would you say that is accurate?

Oditia: The narrative in the work is fascinating to me. I look at other painters I love but I'm not seeing narrative. I love stories. That's why I love music: even when there are no words, you feel a story. I don't know what it is that I'm tapping into.

Forbes: Despite your work dealing with race and the socio-political landscape, it doesn't feel angry. That's interesting to me because there does seem so much to be angry about. I was curious if you ever find yourself distancing yourself from anger for a more total narrative.

Oditia: I admire people like Obama, who had the right to be angry but knows how to stay even. Or think of it like this: a child that was abused that grows into a parent that doesn't abuse their kids. That is an amazing thing. That's a step beyond. They are doing something beyond themselves. But don't get me wrong: I do react sometimes. I was just in Switzerland with my wife, and everyone was talking about Africans like they are only one kind of people. I was getting mad, and wondered why. I realized it was because they were talking about Africans as one type, but everybody is different. My daughter has a Swiss Mom and a Nigerian Dad. Someone will tell her she's black, but she can be whomever she wants and live the way she wants.

Forbes: It reminds me of the classic example: Malcolm X coming around to the philosophy of Dr. King, or in comic book terms Magneto coming around to the philosophy of

Oditia: (laughs) Professor X, yeah! Everyone wants vengeance, but to not indulge vengeance is a testament to strength.

Forbes: Has what has been going on in the news come in to your conceptual practice?

Oditia: I love history. What the Internet originally provided me was a land of opportunity to learn, but now has become a land of commerce. But with twitter, people can and do use the 'net for protest. I was just researching Abbie Hoffman, and he thought everything was jaded in the '80s in the Reagan era and he ended up committing suicide. If he had lived today he would have thought, "Wow." Look at these kids today, they protest everything, and have the right to do it: Black Lives Matter, what's going on around universities. There's an intellectual debate that totally trumps what we had in the '80s and '90s because the understanding of our culture and our reality is evolving.

Forbes: And the access to information is just better.

Oditia: When I see my students, I'm just like, "wow." These kids are doing amazing stuff.

Forbes: It's good to hear you say that because I am only 28, I am a millennial and people pigeonhole us as an apathetic generation but what I have seen these last few years that just isn't true.

Odita: No it's not true at all. You guys have so many different conditions. I had my parents over for Thanksgiving and my dad was talking about how terrible it would be to be young today.

Forbes: It's also the first generation where people can do everything right: work hard, study, become an expert at a skill, get all the right degrees, and still grow up and be underpaid until they are 35 years old.

Odita: Absolutely.

Forbes: I am fascinated by the title of your most recent show, *The Velocity of Change*, because your work deals with light and color, which of course moves at the speed of light. The velocity of change is slow, even if it is speeding up. Could you explain the title?

Odita: There are no lines in nature, only forms. When we look at and contemplate a space, we are looking at the edges of objects that are not lines but shadow and light. The shift of shadow that defines form is based on the velocity of the light, or the velocity of change of light. I was thinking, "Wow, no lines. What are lines? They are separations, or containers. It's something in a simplistic way that makes a form on a piece of paper." If things have no lines in space then the lines we see in forms are the lines that we draw to separate us as human beings, to be structured. I like to think of things deeply, because it's fun.

Forbes: It's the pushing back of those lines.

Odita: Exactly.



# QUIET LUNCH

CREATIVE SUSTENANCE DAILY



## ODILI DONALD ODITA | CREATING IN VAIN

In Visual Arts. by Kurt McVey January 18, 2018 [Leave a Comment](#)

In the lead up to the latest exhibition by Nigerian-born, American-raised artist Odili Donald Odita—his fifth solo outing since 2006 at Jack Shainman Gallery—all press materials pointed to this particular show being called *Celebration*. But in the days leading up to the exhibition’s January 5th opening, the show’s title evolved, one could say. It is now *Third Sun*.

“There is more than one way of understanding a piece of artwork or body of work,” says Odita over the phone, his voice resonating with an urgent sense of clarity. “These things are not binary, but multi-dimensional.”

“Evolution” as a word, works here because Odita has by no means thrown out all the implications of the word “celebration,” rather, he’s absorbed it. Much like the title of multi-media artist Nick Cave’s November 2017 exhibition at Nashville’s Frist Center for the Visual Arts, *Nick Cave: Feat*, Odita also recognizes that a solo exhibition at a major

gallery or institution, let alone a successful career in art, and by an artist of color especially, is no small feat, should not be taken for granted, and is continued cause for-you guessed it-celebration. But why the last minute change?

*“Third Sun* means many things,” Odita offers, “but I’m thinking of it as a third try, maybe in an ecological sense, or a third option, or third space, as opposed to the third world or third people.” It should be noted here that this interview took place just moments after President Trump, allegedly, in an intimate Oval Office meeting, referred to several smaller countries, especially those in Africa, as “shithole[s].” Odita, who was born in Enugu, Nigeria in 1966, was only six months old when his family fled the West African country due to the Biafran war, a brutal civil conflict with lasting geopolitical implications.

“My father had a scholarship to study in America.

He later became an Art Historian and founded the History of African Art and Archeology Department at the Ohio State University. If it weren’t for the kind people in America in the ‘60s who embraced international education scholarships, I wouldn’t be here. If this happened in 2017, I’m not sure if I would have drowned in an ocean. “

Growing up in the Midwest (Columbus, Ohio), Odita struggled with this exact derogatory perception of Africa his entire life. Such extreme Western viewpoints in regard to the admittedly complicated nature of an entire continent (Africa is violent, backward, etc.) of course, become internalized, but to hear such callous rhetoric from the mouthpiece of our highest office (though not surprising) is not only triggering, but frustrating to an almost debilitating degree. Jordan Peele’s notion of a “sunken place,” coined and illustrated beautifully in his breakout directorial debut *Get Out*, might be the most appropriate metaphor for this suffocating, disheartening metaphysical state of mind.

*“Celebration* was something that was pivotal for me in 2016, after the presidential election,” says Odita. “It was a ‘create in vain’ situation as I was unable to make work for a number of months. I couldn’t really justify work being made under these auspices. I saw a certain kind of bullying and the denial of people’s accomplishments and traditions, the erasure of other people’s history, all as an absolute type of

censorship. I understood celebration coming out of that as a means of acknowledging oneself despite those who wish to make you disappear.”

*Celebration*, one could say, is a kind of memorial in the face of struggle and the gross denial of human action. *Third Sun*, as an extension, is a greater appeal toward sophistication, a positive approach to an appreciation of complexity, despite the word “complex” often being used as a lazy excuse for topical dismissal. For Oditia, this latest exhibition is evidence that he has and will continue to overcome personal, physiological and creative difficulty.

“The creative block I had was really about the overt racism that was openly spoke of and utilized to get the guy in office,” says Oditia. “Some people laugh at this guy and his rhetoric, but someone was killed in Charlottesville. White supremacists were emboldened to say this country is theirs again. There are people of educated mind with prosperous lifestyles and jobs that voted for this guy despite his racist, sexist, xenophobic, heartfelt evil statements. That was a depressing time. After Obama, after the so-called world of post black kinfolk, I saw white racism and sexism come out in full glory.”

One of the more rewarding elements of speaking to artists at any stage of their career is discovering how they pull themselves out of a state of disillusionment—a psychological sunken place. “It came from a deeper understanding of what celebration is: an affirmation of what has been accomplished, that there is still a struggle and a fight. It’s not something that is done once but needs to be done every day.”

A great example of this exasperating truth, is the story of African-American architect Julian Francis Abele, who Oditia deeply researched when he was commissioned back in 2015 to create two large-scale murals as part of “Nasher10,” a celebration of the first decade of the Nasher Museum’s founding and commitment to culturally conscious programming. Oditia’s mural inside the Museum’s Mary D.B.T. Semans Great Hall, *Shadow* and *Light*, is inspired by the architect, the first ever black graduate of the University of Pennsylvania who is credited with designing most of Duke’s campus many years before he would ever be allowed to attend. In a tragic sense of irony, Abele was barred from even visiting the university due to fierce Jim Crow segregation in the South. Abele’s great-grand niece, Susan Cook, a sophomore at Duke, would later highlight this systemic expression of America’s hypocrisy in the university newspaper,

not long after campus-wide South African apartheid protests in 1986 divided faculty and student body.

“Everything my parents told me, all these stories. They’re real,” says Oditia, who like many marginalized voices debates whether or not he relaxed a bit too much during the Obama years. “Everything is real. We need to be alert.”

There is a similar conversation happening in the art world at large, built around the realities of equity, inclusion and representation. From a writer’s objective viewpoint, things are getting better. Though one is both eager and hard-pressed to say we’ve “turned a corner,” it must be noted that there is often another corner around said corner. This similarly allows for a corner to be turned (and celebrated) while remaining alert. For Oditia, who has found a decade-plus home at Jack Shainman, a notoriously inclusive space for artists of color (a constant cause for celebration, not to be taken for granted), his perspective from a cultural epicenter of said conversation is fascinating to say the least.

“On one hand we have this good thing,” Oditia begins, acknowledging this cultural shift. “Does the good wipe away the bad? Does the bad wipe away the good? I want to acknowledge accomplishment and what’s been successful, but also to understand that the struggle for quality and justice and creative freedom still needs to be worked out. Even with galleries like Jack Shainman or the Whitney Biennial, there’s oversight and missteps. We need to keep asking: How can we grow as human beings?”

As one might guess, the conversation turns to Dana Schutz’ “Open Casket,” 2016, the most controversial work at the recent Whitney Biennial, which depicted Emmett Till in a colorful meta-commentary on abstraction, authorship, censorship and cultural appropriation and invited several protests and boycotts. In diving back to this topic, Oditia brings out a fascinating if not inherently problematic proposal: the democratic selection of potentially controversial, triggering works at massive public exhibitions.

“I ask myself the question: If we had public debate in discussing something as tragic as the Vietnam or Iraqi wars or the destruction of the Twin Towers, we would have a debate about whether or not we would include these pieces. This character (Till), this figure, is a monument. If there were an actual public debate before the work was presented, where would this painting stand?”

This flips the entire art world paradigm on its head. Is art primarily a reactionary endeavor? An individual or a select few (the 2017 Biennial was co-curated by Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks, both of Asian descent) are deputized to curate and select works, arrange them in a box or site specific setting and reveal it to the public, who reacts, for better or worse. So what if potentially controversial works submitted to the next Whitney Biennial were open to a preliminary public debate and selection? Who would be allowed to vote? Whose voices would be heard outside of the parties already in place at such an institution? Would Jordan Wolfson's shocking VR piece, "Real Violence," have made it in?

"I think art making and production is a reflection of human consciousness," says Odit, after sitting on this for a moment. "I do feel that art needs to somehow, but not always, live above morality. Art should have the opportunity to challenge moral opinion, expanding upon those notions or rethinking the notion of what we understand in the world. But dealing with something specific, I think, in a monumental sense, in the case of what happened with Dana Schutz; I think something else should come into play. That is a responsibility, not by the judge and jury, but by the artist."

But one has to ask: Did Schutz know exactly what she was doing? Was she abstracting the figurative, this human monument, himself abstracted, the larger story-also abstracted? Also, should Schutz maintain the right to offend?

"The censorship or self-censorship of political correctness," Odit pauses for a moment, "I tend to look at it like a painting that's just not that good. She needs to make better paintings than that. She (Schutz) said, 'I'm a mother. I understand empathy.' I have empathy for a lot of things, but do I have the understanding, the knowledge of the history of the subject matter? She should understand it more than just, 'I'm a mother.' Till's own mother, in the face of politicians, the governor, against all the authorities that were there, said, 'Keep the casket open.' This is perhaps the single most Avant-garde action I can think of. In comparison to that small painting on the wall, it just falls incredibly short."

For Odit, the action has to be understood and the action has to be real. This is the core ethos that he imparts to his students at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia, where he's served as a Professor of Painting since 2006 since 2006. But how can he help young artists find and nurture their most personal, unique voice in an increasingly political art world, and during a climate that demands



activism as much as aesthetics? How can he push students who might not check marginalized boxes to push the envelope?

“They’re all struggling with these realities,” Odita says of his students. “Some ignore it and make art as entertainment, others really take on the pressure and responsibility that comes with being an artist. It’s about being there every day with them and understanding that there can be something deeper, while expressing their individuality.”

Odita enjoys engaging his students in the ongoing art-debate, this being that “there’s nothing original, painting may be dead, art may be dead, etc.,” but insists there is great beauty in understanding how each of us can be unique and original. “It’s the work that we each have to do to find our original voice,” he adds. “So much work is overproduced and cynical, but we have to find something pure and when we find it, treat it as special.”

And what about Odita’s unique voice? How can a fierce, professorial mind with an eye for social justice and activism create sufficient interpretive space for viewers who may not be familiar with the author’s race, gender, class, origins or his political views? How does the lay-public engage with his street murals, for instance? Odita’s somewhat abstract, elegant, acute fractal paintings, the contents of which he calls “bodies in space,” are not didactic or overtly polemic. At a time where Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald’s sure to be fabulous portraits of the Obamas could thrive in any major contemporary art gallery as much as their eventual home, The National Portrait Gallery, how can Odita’s colorful body forms translate and connect politically and should they even have to?

“Keith Anthony Morrison, a fine artist and intellectual of Jamaican decent talks a lot about the diversity of the black experience and the complexity of the black Diaspora,” explains Odita. “We continually have to overcome binary, simplistic thinking in terms of the black experience. The color in my paintings, they’re not the same blue, not the same red, not the same yellow. This is the same for black people: it’s not all the same hair, same culture, or same food.”

It’s this notion that activates Odita’s vibrant, audacious color-forms in a political sense. This striking but at times subtle complexity stands in the face of Trump’s ignorance;

from his insulting, “What do they (black people) got to lose?” statements regarding the multifarious problems in black urban life in America on the 2016 campaign trail to his latest, myopic and grossly sophomoric viewpoints on African and island nations.

“ ‘It’s all the same people.’ That’s terrible,” says Oditia, still trying to shake this new normal, which is unfortunately, for so many, just more of the same. “When working in abstraction as a person of color, like so many artists before me, I’m saying we have the freedom to express ourselves in an individual way. We need to allow ourselves to do that as much as we should ask the world to allow us to do that.”

# STERNTHAL



Ian: How did your family ended up in the States?

Odili: I was born in Nigeria in 1966, right before the start of the Biafran War, a civil war precipitated by the Igbo's desire to separate from Nigeria. While it was publicized to the world as a religious war, essentially it was a war of ideology and belief. I'm Igbo, and my family left Nigeria for the United States due to the war, which the Igbo lost. Millions were killed in the process. Had we won, my people would have been called the Biafran nation. Nigeria quickly developed from the 1970's onward; there was an optimism that emerged and continued through the 1980's. Simultaneously corruption was building, and eventually took hold of the country, Nigeria remains a rich country, but there's a lot of inequity and a lot of mismanagement.

Ian: Did your parents have a hard time adjusting to life in the U.S?

Odili: Before I was born my father had gone to Indiana University on an academic scholarship to study art, so he was already somewhat established in the U.S. We initially moved to Indiana and then to Iowa, where my Mother got her degree, and then to Columbus, Ohio where I grew up from the age of four. My father, who was one of the Zaria rebels, started the history of African art program at Ohio State university in the 1970's.

Ian: Who were the Zaria rebels?

Odili: The rebels were a group of academics who wanted to synthesize African and Eurocentric perspectives into their practice as artists. They were intent on incorporating traditional indigenous African concerns into the academic curriculum. They're still known today for their contributions to modern art in Nigeria. There were 8 of them, including Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Sam Grillo, and of course my father, Emanuel Odita, amongst others. They were professors at the Nigerian College of Art, Science, and Technology – known today as Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. My father continued promoting and sharing Nigerian art with the world when he came to the United States.

Ian: Your work expresses a lot of dualities – what was it like growing up in the United States in a Nigerian household?

Odili: My 'American experience' was confusing in the sense that my household was very Nigerian, both in the way that we ate food and interacted with each other. The only thing lacking was the language, and our physical displacement. When I was in first or second grade, my teachers wanted to hold me back because they said I wasn't making any sense in school. My father worried that I might be mixing English with Igbo, so they decided to stop speaking Igbo to us. Today we know that you can speak multiple languages with children, and though they may take longer to speak, when they do, they can compartmentalize various languages. I grew up in a household where the concerns were more international, as opposed to school – where everything was very local – to do with American politics, Football, and news. I felt like I was always living between two worlds which rarely intersected. If I brought up Nigerian issues in school – they wouldn't know what I was talking about. And when I brought those concerns that I got in school back home, my parents really didn't care. Growing up in a space of simultaneously diverging realities forced me to contend with both, and my process in work as in life has been to try and unify disparate realities.

## **FLAT COLOR**

Ian: You famously said that "Color in itself has the possibility of mirroring the complexity of the world as much as it has the potential for being distinct." Tell me about how you started painting.

Odili: My first experience in a painting studio was with my father. I remember being as little as seven or eight years old, helping him stretch his canvases, applying the rabbit skin glue, cooking it, and gesso-ing his canvases. He taught me, and I would watch him draw and paint. His work influenced me in the sense that it I looked at it all the time – his paintings were all over our house. I studied the way that the colors were applied and placed on the canvas. Though the work was figurative, the way he structured color on the canvases largely influenced the way that I see color in space.

Ian: Is your own use of flat color derived from this tradition?

Odili: My father's color was flat, although he modulated the way that the color existed within the spaces and shapes he created. As within cubism, or Picasso's figurative works, his colors were laid down as shape, which came together to make figurative forms. When I look at the treatment of space in my canvases, I understand that although some of the fragmentation within my own work is related to his, my work has a more conceptual, almost physiological relationship to color. His color was used as pattern; as within textiles, his palette has more of a descriptive quality. I use color to create spaces which engage the viewer's body, works that depend on a symbiosis with the viewer's perspective, in the construction of a virtual space.

Ian: Is there something African about the idea of flat color or clearly defined spaces of color? How does this connect to the history of African art or African textiles?

Odili: There are two types of African textiles; those which were indigenously produced, and those manufactured in Europe and distributed throughout Africa. It's an interesting phenomenon which was dissected in the work of the Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, who creates large installations with African 'batik' or textiles, in order to ask a question, I frequently think about – what is Africa? What is African? My paintings allude to African forms found within these textiles, but they are not representations of these textiles. I am using these 'tropes' as a reference to create a new space – conceived either virtually, actually, philosophically, emotionally, or politically. Playing with these tropes is but a point of departure, from which I go on to fragment and unify space through colors. Juxtaposing colors, placed against another colors, proposes a notion of togetherness and non-togetherness, a simultaneous movement both towards and against, derived from within the paintings aesthetic dimensions.

Ian: Would you say that your palette has brightened over the years?

Odili: My color has gotten more intense over the years. Formally speaking, I have gotten better at creating color combinations, but in a conceptual sense, I feel my palette has gotten closer to African colors. Earlier on in my project I was thinking of African color in the sense of how I saw it through memory, dusty, the earth mixing with color, eliciting a chromatic power for the sake of getting this naturalness with the Earth. With this idea, in this sense, it's this romantic idea of Africa. Early on in my practice, I was thinking of how to define 'African



color.’ I would look at textiles, and cloth patterns, and I realized that there’s no end to category, that to be ‘Africa’, it didn’t have to be bound to my early romantic conception of ‘African color.’ This realization enabled me to open up my relationship to color, formally and conceptually. The wall work helped me be open to how I see and compose color; which in turn influenced my canvas painting. In essence, the canvas paintings helped me to formulate the drawing in my wall painting and then the color in my wall painting helped to advance and complicate the color in my canvas painting.

## **NEW YORK CITY**

Ian: How are these concerns made manifest in the work? When did you move to New York? How did being in New York change your artistic process?

Odili: I went to New York when I was 24, right after finishing graduate school at Bennington College in Vermont. New York was a place that I had wanted to go to ever since I was a kid. Growing up I collected comic books, listened to a lot of music, and watched a lot of T.V. –media spaces where New York City was heavily represented. It was a place where I longed to be, where I felt I would be free to experience and express myself. In the beginning it was hard to adjust, I had to learn to live there. New York is a microcosm for the world, and I was able to assume and accept the ‘difference’ that I struggled with growing up in a suburban, homogeneous space like Columbus, Ohio. When I was in New York I gathered a lot of different energies, I worked with different kinds of artists, and it gave me the confidence to grow as an artist.

Ian: At your first solo show in New York, ‘Color Theory’ at The Florence Lynch Gallery in 1999, you showed a series of geometric paintings which seem to fuse the flat color of the African tradition with these vanishing points and infinite geometries. I’m curious as to the origins of these works.

Odili: When I first moved to New York I got a job working for a company called Stitch King, which made computer-embroidered logos on polo shirts. We worked with Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator 1.01. These programs presented images in a virtual, endless, and deep space. These ideas expanded the way that I was thinking about painting. Digital technology made me question notions of beginning and end, and think beyond the frame, to imagine what lies outside of the ‘boundaries.’ The paintings I started making at the time grew out of these questions. I was starting to think about painting as way of depicting virtual space, unconfined by the material constraints of the two-dimensional world.

The paintings you referred to do indeed incorporate a triangular geometric formation that is African in origin and conceptual in intention. A triangular block of color starts from one point, incrementally expanding as it reaches the other end of the canvas. The motif expresses the mathematics of infinity – two lines that never really touch, expanding towards infinity and beyond. This structure begs the question of what happens when the line reaches the edge. Does this space continue beyond the canvas, or does it just cease to exist? The triangular shapes stacked above and below move in opposite directions, constantly repeating. This idea came to me from staring at the computer screen, as well as the cinematic screen. When I would see the credits at the end of a film roll off the screen, I wondered whether these texts continued to scroll upwards even though we don’t see them anymore, or do they cease to exist? This idea of the edge and beyond – the edge and within – was something that I began applying towards my understanding of the Western World’s boundaries, in relation to the surrounding ‘peripheral’ areas.

Ian: This questioning of hierarchy and ‘decentralization’ links up with contemporary philosophy’s larger project of deconstruction – to do away with Western philosophy’s metaphysical pre-occupations.

Odili: Traditionally, Western painting has been concerned with the space that lies within the four edges of the canvas. Everything within the canvas is ‘real’, and everything outside of those four edges is peripheral to reality. I started to equate this bias to my experience in the West. The canvas’ center is analagous to the euro-centrism of Western consciousness, with everything outside reduced to the ‘space of the other’, the third world. It was interesting for me to use basic shapes to address broader philosophical and political issues.

## **ABSTRACTION AND POLITICS**

Ian: I noticed in your first solo shows you were showing abstract work alongside multimedia collages made with found images related to race, which seemed heavily involved in an investigation of your own identity. Was this a result of the influence that new media was beginning to bear upon your painting?

Odili: The reason for incorporating the photography with the paintings was to situate the paintings within a certain context. I knew early on that if I showed the paintings by themselves they would immediately be considered within the tradition of Western abstraction. I didn't want my works to be considered only within relation to artists like Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland or Peter Halley. I wanted to be able to have this dialogue go beyond the West and into the space of Africa, the space of the other. So, I felt I had to use those photo-based works for contextual reasons. In essence, I was bringing my curatorial practice into the realm of my artistic practice.

People question how effectively abstract work can function politically, inferring that the lack of 'recognizability' within abstraction somehow hinders the political potential of the work. I think that the political significance of abstract work has to consider the process itself, of how and why the paintings are made. This, coupled with the way they are read, is part of their broader social context.

Ian: It seems to me that your use of abstraction echoses 'the essence' of the multimedia collages you were also making at the time, through the disorientation and confusion of hierarchy achieved through your placement of flat color.

Odili: The flatness of the colors in my work creates a tension which emerges within the canvas; Colors are laid down to create forms which dissect the canvas into various color segments, which through their pairing – beside, under, and over one another – become simultaneously dominant and subordinate, blurring the lines that traditionally divide foreground from background. The technique does away with hierarchy. The push and pull of the colors transform the 'forms' into a 'space' which merges illusion with reality, fact with fiction, inauthenticity with authenticity, without privilege. This concept connects to those preliminary questions I grappled with during my initial experiences with Photoshop: What is there, what is not, what is beyond. I hope each viewer who contemplates the work connects to these thoughts of 'here' and 'there', which emerged in response to my relationship with Nigeria, and my experience in America. Is my American life the real one or my African roots? Am I creating spaces that filled with my experience, or are they portals for others to fill with their own experience? The work constitutes what I consider to be another kind of knowledge, one that transcends existing realities.

Ian: Your early work is more literally connected to identity politics – whether it be through the integration of pop culture imagery into mixed media works, or the curatorial decision to show abstract paintings next to media that informs and contextualizes the work, whereas your more recent works and your later work becomes more abstract. Are the political issues related to race and geography still present within the abstract?

Odili: Identity politics are as prevalent in my abstract work as in the more literal pieces I made earlier on in my career. In my earlier work, the political messages were more didactic, communicated through direct imagery, and photographs from pop culture. With the paintings I address political notions through concept, process and action. On one hand, the paintings are very real they're color on canvas. I don't distinguish between abstraction and figuration. On the one hand I see my work as existing partly within the tradition that's called abstraction, but ultimately, I have a problem with the concept of abstraction because everything in the world is real to me. A straight line across a canvas space is representative of a horizon line, or even just of a line. A line is as real as the difference between sea and sky, or between land and sky.

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I'm interested in speaking to the world through color, line, and form about my experiences. The duality of my life – of being African and America; this sense of one the one hand always being in flight, uncomfortable, in this place of homelessness and dislocation, and on the other of searching for unity. My conception of home is rooted in desire more than memory. It is something that I search for through painting, and often find within the colors as they're brought together in the canvases. The colored mosaics I make represent a self-made of fragments, which together construct a whole. In that sense I relate it to the African experience in the world, the African diaspora, which has had to make its home in the entirety of the world. I feel very lucky to be able to have this practice that I have now where I am able to communicate in ways that go across national boundaries.

## **ON COLOR**

Ian: Do you feel that your work is about kind of healing of public spaces with these vibrant colors? You made a recent installation at the New York Presbyterian Hospital?

Odili: To a certain extent I think that that's very true. I think that an artist's work is always somehow an attempt at communicating individual concerns and interests in the world. I don't know how effective art is in actually make effecting change, lets say in a political sense, but we can be influential as artists. We can make suggestions. We can comment on the world that we live in. I think that is the strength of the artist, to be agents of change in the sense that they communicate their wishes and desires to people. This is what I try to do in my work. I try to think about the spaces that I use my painting to speak in and about. The colors are often an attempt at healing.

Ian: Can you speak about the musicality of your work? And does music influence?

Odili: Music and musicality are very essential to my work, compositionally through the drawing, and emotionally through the color relationships woven into the works. There's a rhythmic pattern to the shapes and the colors applied, which together create something bigger than any one element. This musicality is also experienced by those who absorb the work through their eyes and bodies.

## **ON IDENTITY AND AUTHENTICITY**

Ian: This question of authenticity appears repeatedly in your works. Tell me about 'The Authentic African' piece, and how it was received, both in Africa, and in the United States.

Odili: The 'Authentic African' emerged as question and a response to what I thought was a uniquely American question: Are you authentic? Are you an African? When I was in grade school I remember being asked what it was like to live in Africa. Would I have had to dodge snakes and lions to get to school? I placed each image above two checkboxes with the words 'yes' and 'no' written, reminiscent of multiple choice questions in educational testing. The viewer is conceptually asked to ponder which is the authentic African. I had four African types in that series: The soldier, the businessman, the traditionalist, and the poor boy – I called him the poor shell boy in that series. The 'Authentic African' refers to this question of identity, posed from an American gaze looking at my 'African body.'

Ian: Does this question of authenticity emerge solely from an American perspective?

Odili: I was invited to exhibit in South Africa during the second Johannesburg Biennale curated by Okwui Enwezor in 1997, and I went back again in 2006 to have a group show, and later on for my first solo show. The question of authenticity was posed to me from the South Africans. I was asked how I could still speak of Africa not living in the continent, not rooted within the soil? Could I understand the context of Africa from abroad? I was offended and surprised that an African would challenge the legitimacy of my voice. I believe that I am an agent of Africa. I carry it in my heart and my mind even if I am not physically present, like a satellite. In many ways my circumstances are the result of a massive brain drain; political and economic situations forced us to relocate elsewhere in order to survive. Having been born there, and raised with an African mentality, I am connected to the continent no matter where I am living.

Ian: Tell me about the pieces you created for the Biennale.

Odili: I created a series of billboards and bus shelter posters for the Johannesburg Biennale. The bus shelter posters showed a piece called 'Endorfin' sonically connected to endorphin, referring to an energy rush, but alphabetically spelling end or fin (which means end in French). The image was of the dancer Bill T. Jones. His body was split in half horizontally by a target. In that specific image, I was identifying the black male body as a living target. This work was made within the context of South Africa's reconciliation trials, where the past atrocities of apartheid were examined in court. This piece was very timely, and it affected many people in the community, to the point where many people stole the signs and posters from different locations around the city. Unfortunately, I never got to see the work because of the situation in South Africa. The show signified an important first step in the growing globalization of the art world.

Ian: You also exhibited 'Off Center' there. Tell me about the work.

Odili: Off Center symbolizes the condition of the African in the diaspora. We have no center, in the sense that we didn't have a place we can return to with a safe feeling of home. In the world we're never really safe, we're always foreigners or foreigners in a strange land. Having to find ourselves, and our center, without the material components.

Ian: At a certain point your paintings literally exploded off of the canvas, and onto walls, floors, ceilings, literally enveloping the body in a way you were previously only alluding to. How did this come about?

Odili: In September of 2003 'A Fiction of Authenticity' opened at the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis. The curator hung three large paintings very close to each other, it was the first time that I saw the paintings working together, existing as a wall. I had made a painting on the wall for the first time in 1999, but that work didn't approach the wall as an immersive experience with multiple vantage points. When I saw the three paintings together, I understand the potential of the wall, where one could experience the work through walking, as something I could work with and push further.

## **FROM THE CANVAS TO THE WALL**

Ian: How did you push this further?

Odili: I had the opportunity to make a wall work in 2007 at the 52nd Venice Biennale for Art. Rob Storr, the curator, invited me to create a work in the central entry part of the Italian Pavilion in the Giardini. The wall that I made in Venice was entirely encompassing in two directions, covering two intersecting hallways. The work

was partially a reaction to the canals that divide Venice. The walls were horizontally divided in two – with a row of lights in the center. I covered the space above the lights with colored arches, representative of the architectural richness of Venice, but also as an allusion to the heavens, or to ancestry. It was a celestial space, coning and sheltering the color-space beneath. The piece was called ‘Give me Shelter’, a large experiential painting that created both a transitory and a sheltering experience for the viewers. I wanted the painting to act as a shelter for those who passed through, where they could feel safe, at home, and blanketed by the colors. It worked on so many different levels, and with this work many people began to grasp the possibilities. Painting originated on the wall, but beyond that, the installation showed how painting could speak about trans-cultural experience through the use of a space as a canvas – incorporating the viewer within the space, rather than having them merely look from the outside.

Ian: After Venice, it seems like the geometric patterns begin to complicate. Can you speak a bit about that?

Odili: ‘Give Me Shelter’ opened a lot of doors for me. After Venice I started travelling more to create site specific works that transcended the canvas, and for each project I drew inspiration from the new contexts I was making the work in. I usually start by researching the building, or the geographical region where the piece will live, drawing information from these environments in order to inform the design – in terms of the colors and the formal shapes

Ian: Can you walk us through the process of how these works are made? Do you start it with drawings on paper? Is it a mathematical diagram...?

Odili: I start my paintings with drawings made on graph paper, and then I apply the work directly onto the canvas or the wall. Only recently, with the commissioned work, have I started making studies. The drawing itself holds and contains the color, but it is only while I start applying the color that the final shades are determined, and the work takes on a new less predictable direction. Think of watching a river flow over a bed of rocks; the bed of rocks, like the graphs, are like an armature, and the color is like the water. The water moves and circulates based on the structure of the underneath. If the bed of rocks was structured differently, then the water would flow in a different manner, and the colors I chose are also influenced by the structure of the drawing. The work's power is derived from this combination of form and color.

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

In recent years, Odita has been commissioned to paint several large-scale wall installations including The United States Mission to the United Nations in New York (2011), the Savannah College of Art and Design (2012), New York Presbyterian Hospital (2012), New Orleans Museum of Art (2011), Kiasma, Helsinki (2011) and the George C. Young Federal Building and Courthouse in Orlando, Florida (2013). Odita has had several solo exhibitions in museums and institutions across the globe including Savannah College of Art and Design; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; Studio Museum in Harlem; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita; and Princeton University.

Odita was born in 1966 in Enugu, Nigeria and lives and works in Philadelphia. He has been the recipient of a Penny McCall Foundation Grant in 1994, a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant in 2001, and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Grant in 2007. Also in 2007, his large installation Give Me Shelter was featured prominently in the 52nd Venice Biennale exhibition Think With The Senses, Feel With the Mind, curated by Robert Storr. He has been represented at The Jack Shainman Gallery since 2006. Solo exhibitions at the gallery include Velocity of Change (2016), Body & Space (2010), Fusion (2006). He has curated an exhibition at the gallery titled The Color Line (2007) and a solo exhibition, This, That and the Other (2013).



## ODILI DONALD ODITA THIRD SUN

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**Through Feb 10**

at *513 West 20th Street*



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# ARTISTS ON ARTISTS

## OLUOGUIBE ON ODILI DONALD ODITA

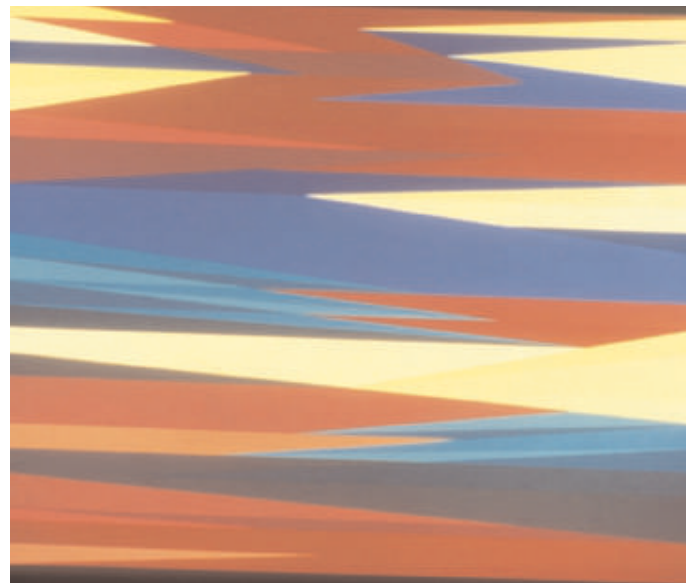
*Forthright* is a rare word in the contemporary art world, one I like to associate with Odili Donald Odita. Honest, with a sense of integrity and dignity that comes through in the sophisticated and subtle, yet deeply engaged nature of his work.

For over a decade and a half of practice, Odita has remained on the deep and philosophical plane, seeking beneath the surface of things, questioning the efficacy of strategies and methods, investigating the limits of language and rhetoric, insisting on the genealogy and prospect of forms, concepts and words. As an artist he pays close attention to the historical burden as well as the potential of every element in his work, be it medium, design strategy or technique. A painting is not simply a painting; it is also part of a long tradition, a history, an aesthetic as well as political narrative from which it may not easily be isolated or divorced. A color is not to be considered without full awareness of its multiple valences both chromatic and metaphorical, since color and pigment are conceptual anchors and potent signifiers. A traditional support such as canvas does not escape associations that locate it first within the Western tradition but also tie it to subsequent moments in the history of its use, including its adoption in colonized cultures and its resilient and seldom interrogated genderedness. There is a post-structuralist sensibility evident in Odita's work that disassembles form and sensitizes the viewer to its syntax—and, more importantly, transcends formal assemblage of fragments to highlight the cultural imbrications in those fragments.

Though Odita has produced installations and photo-based pieces

over the past decade, he works primarily as a painter. His paintings range from hard-edge to tonal abstraction with occasional invocation of abstract landscape painting. I have related his paintings to modal jazz for their ability to combine a spare integrity with tonal effusion. In the same manner that modal jazz aspires toward pure sound, Odita's paintings achieve a significant level of visual and chromatic purity that lends them vibrancy and spaciousness. His use of space is lean, deep and resonant. Even so, in the same way that Coltrane's notes were imbued with the eloquent sound of activism, Odita's elements are loaded with social questions and implications, as well as challenges for abstraction as a language: How does abstraction deal with the reality of race in the post-millennial age? How does pigment speak to our obvious diversity and the beauty of that diversity, as well as the insidious machinations of exoticism and stereotypy? How do social striations translate on canvas? How does theory transcend its rhetorical shortcomings and open itself to its full aesthetic and civic potency? How does beauty serve as vehicle in the ultimate fulfillment of the creative process that is submission to the work of art?

Odita rejects as vacuous, indeed nonexistent, the kind of formalist or so-called pure abstraction promoted at midcentury, especially in America, and insists instead that "all visual materials are culturally grounded and that it is important to recognize where their meaning is derived from." In doing so he reminds us that the challenge of utopia cannot be escaped through false evacuation of meaning from beauty or form.



Above left: *The Third Eye*, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 109". Photo by The Contemporary Art Center, St. Louis. Right: *The Days*, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 60". Photo by Richard Brunck. Opposite page: Top: *Rift*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 109". Photo by Richard Brunck. Bottom: *Here is Now*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 109". Photo by Richard Brunck. All images courtesy of Florence Lynch Gallery, New York; Judith Belot Gallery, Zurich; Schuster Gallery, Frankfurt.

**ARTISTS ON ARTISTS**, a series seen throughout our pages, is sponsored by the W. L. Lyons Brown, Jr. Charitable Foundation and the New York State Council on the Arts.



# ARTREPORT

## The Language Of Painting By Artist Odita At Jack Shainman Gallery

By Quincy Childs - Jan 25, 2016



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

## Painted Colors in Conflicted Motion

by Robert C. Morgan on January 21, 2016



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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

## Politics in Bursts of Color

By Gabrielle Bruney — Dec 19 2015



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

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



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

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



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

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

## Nasher Mural Work Completed

August 24, 2015 |

DURHAM, NC -



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

One mural is done, a second to be completed.

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

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

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

*Below, a detail from the Nasher mural.*



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# The Herald-Sun

## Color as an agent of change

Nasher commissions two murals for 10th anniversary

Aug. 03, 2015 @ 04:48 PM

[Cliff Bellamy](#)



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## MAGAZINE

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## INTERVIEW



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

## TENSION THROUGH PATTERNS

In conversation with artist Odili Donald Odita

by Stefanie Jason

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

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

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

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

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

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

### PLACE /

## STEVENSON

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

**SJ: And how do you relate to music?**

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

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

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

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

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

ODO: Everything [laughs].

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

**SJ: What are you currently working on?**

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

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

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



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## Odili Donald Odita

### Give Me Shelter, 2007

Odita moved from his native Nigeria to the United States with his parents when he was only six months old, and so grew up in a country in which his specifically African identity was subsumed within a more general categorization of 'blackness'. Throughout his formative years as an artist he was acutely aware of how inseparable all areas of culture are from their geography and history. Perversely, perhaps, Odita was drawn to Hard-edge Abstraction – a genre of painting that, in America at least, had once aspired to empty itself of such cultural content and traditional associations. Odita's dynamic compositions openly allude to

African textiles and decoration through their improvised and irregular patterns and vibrant palette. Paintings such as *Give Me Shelter* – which is applied directly to the wall of a given space – also evoke the distant open landscapes of Africa.

— Kelly, Scheibitz, Shahbazi

**Odili Donald Odita.** b Enugu, Nigeria, 1966. *Give Me Shelter.* 2007. Acrylic latex wall paint, coloured pigment on wall. h6 x w18 x l18m. h7 ft 9 1/8 in x w59 ft 3 in x l59 ft. Installation view, Italian Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennale, 2007

## Ofili Christopher

### Afro Apparition

In 1992, while still a scholarship to Zim (perspective on his r are from Nigeria), a effects that he cont paintings made for technique that Ofili of elephant dung (li become pedestals f

**Chris Ofili.** b Murchas h275 x w214cm. h108

N.Y. / REGION

# A New York Subway Line That Doubles as an Art Gallery

OCT. 15, 2014

Building Blocks

By **DAVID W. DUNLAP**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The figures were removed almost immediately.

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



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

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

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

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

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

# Black Abstraction: Not a Contradiction

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

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

## “Donald Judd didn’t have to explain himself.

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

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

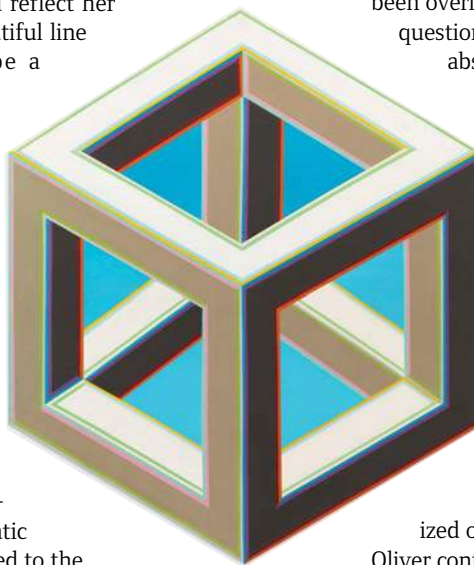
In her recent show at Sikkema Jenkins in New York, an atonal sound environment accompanied her monochromatic paintings that had acoustic panels attached to the canvases. Strips of fluorescent color painted on the edges of the canvases bounced off the white walls and created a sense of movement, rhythm, and vibration. “This art and music juncture,” she says, “gave me the permission to point to something in

the room that said, ‘I didn’t fall out of the sky.’”

The contributions of African American artists to the inventions of abstract painting have historically been overlooked, or else fraught with the kind of questions faced by Jones. “Generations of black abstract painters never seem to be cele-

brated,” says Valerie Cassel Oliver, senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, where she recently organized “Black in the Abstract,” a two-part exhibition that focused on the history of African American painters working in abstraction. She placed younger artists, including Jones, Shinique Smith, and Angel Otero, in dialogue with members of the older generation, such as Felrath Hines, Alma Thomas, and Romare Bearden, who were producing seminal works in the 1960s.

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



Hilarie M. Sheets is an ARTnews contributing editor.



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

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

with what black artists are doing, period."

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

found ways to meld their art and activism.

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

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

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

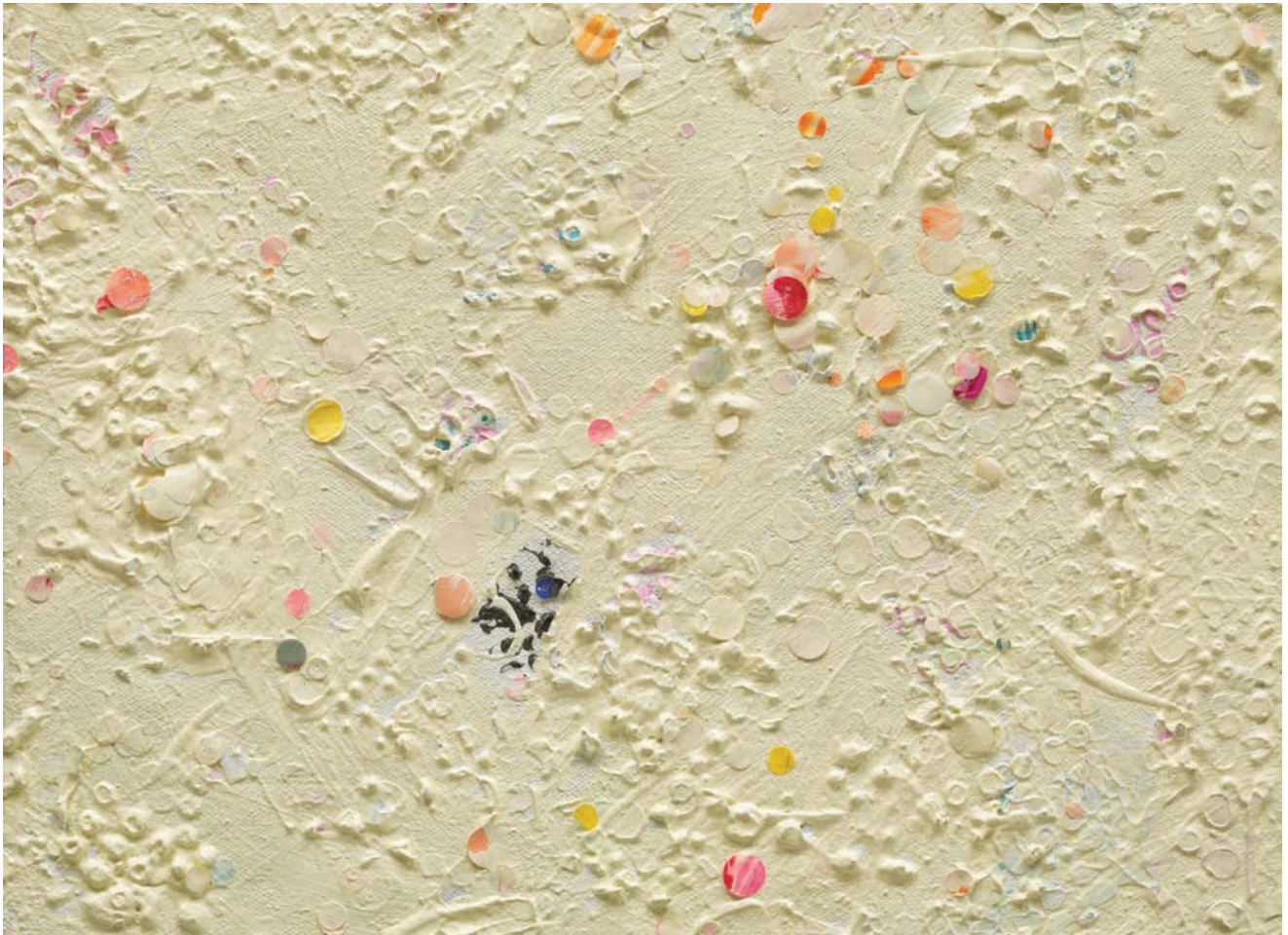
The Brooklyn show includes Whitten's *Birmingham 1964*, in which a newspaper photograph of a confrontation in Birmingham is partially revealed under layers of stocking mesh and black oil paint, like a wound that can't be covered over. The





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





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

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

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

**As a graduate student at Yale in the mid-1960s** Howardena Pindell, 71, also found inspiration in the work of the older generation of abstractionists—namely Ad Reinhardt’s paintings of close-value colors and Larry Poons’s Op art canvases of circles





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

COURTESY JUNE KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK

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

"I remember going with my abstract work to the

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

## Double-Consciousness Raising

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

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

For Cassel Oliver, who is 51 and a native Houstonian, the Contemporary Arts Museum was a formative place. "The world was very small in Houston when I was growing up and the CAMH

provided a worldview that was much more expansive than what existed for me at that time," she says. She remembers first coming to the museum as a teenager and being exposed to Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys.

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

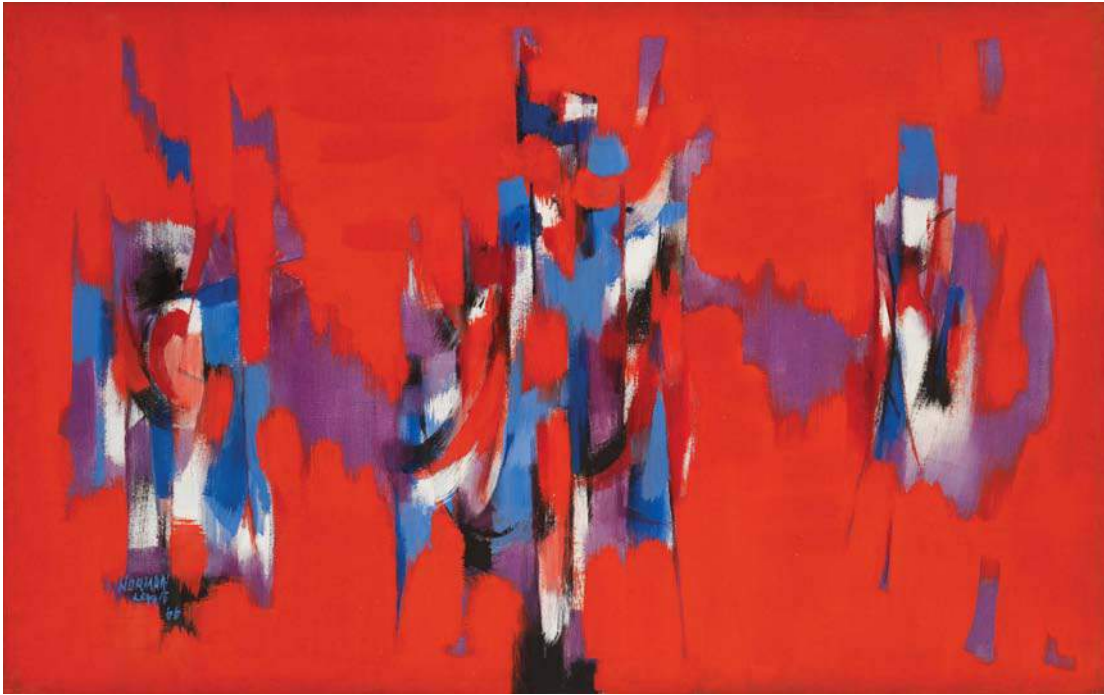
"Since the museum was very open to my vision, here was a golden opportunity to expand the history and to talk about the evolution of various genres and where black artists fit within those spectrums," says Cassel Oliver, who in 2011 received the Driskell Prize for her contribution to the field of African



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

American art and art history. "There are more younger artists now in art schools, trying to find their own legacies and not seeing themselves reflected. They are not the first ones doing this type of work. It's basically shedding light on what is right in front of you." — **H.M.S.**





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



TOP: COURTESY MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY LLC, NEW YORK; BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JUNE KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK





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Digimarc Discover is a free download that is compatible with the iPhone (models 3GS and higher), the iPad (version 2 or later), and the fourth generation iPod Touch, as well as Android devices.

Firewall, a 2013 painting by Odili Donald Odita.



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

### 194 TOP OF HER GAME

For her home away from home in a tower overlooking Hollywood, producer Ellen Rakieta goes girly and glamorous. *By Ingrid Abramovitch*

### 200 A BARN REBORN

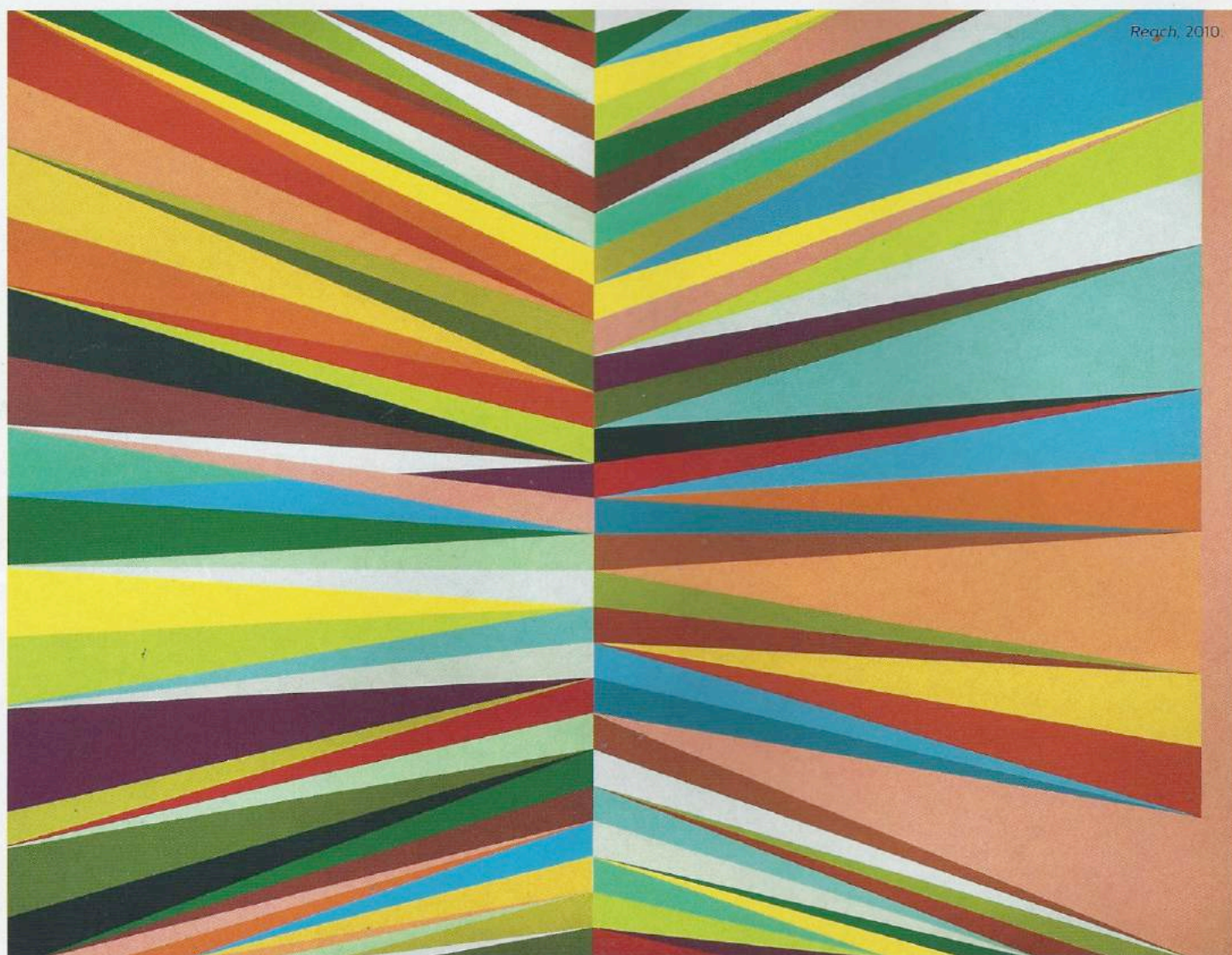
An artist enlists a young London firm to transform a derelict dairy barn into a family home that merges the industrial with the poetic. *By Chloe Grimshaw*

### 206 WORDS TO LIVE BY

For a book lover, decorator Jim Luigs crafts a New York apartment inscribed with wisdom. *By Celia Barbour*

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## ODILI DONALD ODITA

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

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

Odita was six months old when his family fled Nigeria at the onset of the civil war in 1967 and landed in the American Midwest. His father, an art historian and painter, taught at Ohio State University in Columbus and kept African traditions alive in their cloistered home. Odita felt isolated in his adopted country, where people of color are often

labeled merely "black," a term he finds vague and inaccurate. In his work, he never repeats the same tone from one painting to the next and thinks of each color as being as unique and distinct as an individual.

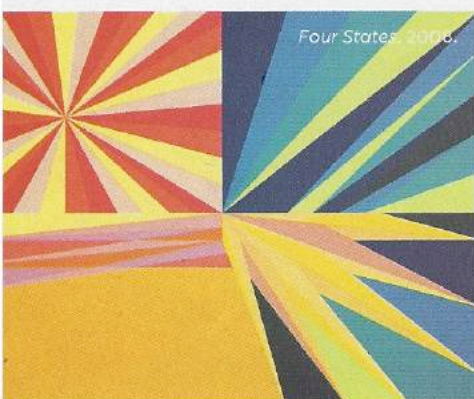
His geometric compositions are informed by sources ranging from African textiles and the landscape of Nigeria—he first returned for a visit at age 10—to TV test patterns, screen savers, midcentury wallpaper, and music. "For me, color is the closest thing to sound," says Odita, who strives to create the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

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





The Gate, 2013.



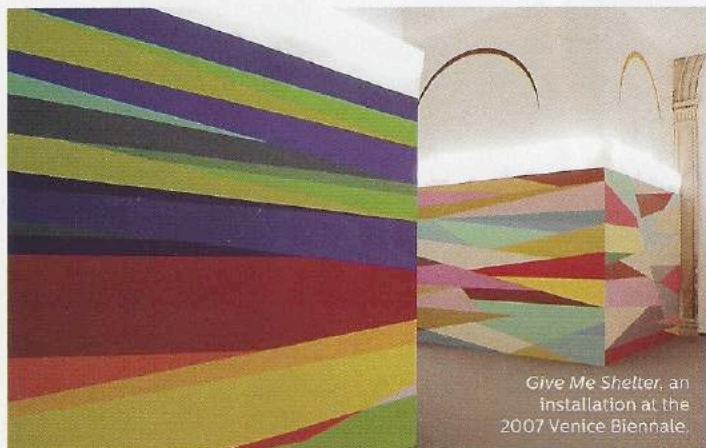
Four States, 2006.



Point of Return, 2010.

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

After seeing a wall painting in the artist's 2006 show at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, Storr gave Odita his first opportunity to work on a monumental scale when he curated the 52nd International Exhibition at the 2007 Venice Biennale. In an enormous hallway in the Italian Pavilion, Odita painted long horizontal bands of color



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

that jostled and converged at the corners of the walls, creating a sense of crossroads. "I realized these wall paintings could be in dialogue with the architecture," Odita says. "The piece changed as you moved around it."

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

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



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





## ODILI DONALD ODITA'S MESMERIZING PAINTINGS

By Sola Agustsson | October 24, 2013

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

# ARTFORUM

APRIL 2013

## Odili Donald Odita

BETA PICTORIS GALLERY / MAUS CONTEMPORARY

2411 Second Avenue North

March 15–April 19



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

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

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

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

— Cinqué Hicks

# The New York Times

**City Room**



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

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

by RANDY LEONARD



Librado Romero/The New York Times

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

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

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

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

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

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

The 5,000-square-foot abstract painting is a vibrant series of vertical diamond and chevron shapes of blue, purple, green, and ocher – created by [Odili Donald Odita](#), a well-known artist with a worldwide following.

“I’m a huge modern art fan,” said Ms. Miller, 42. “I see a lot of different things in it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

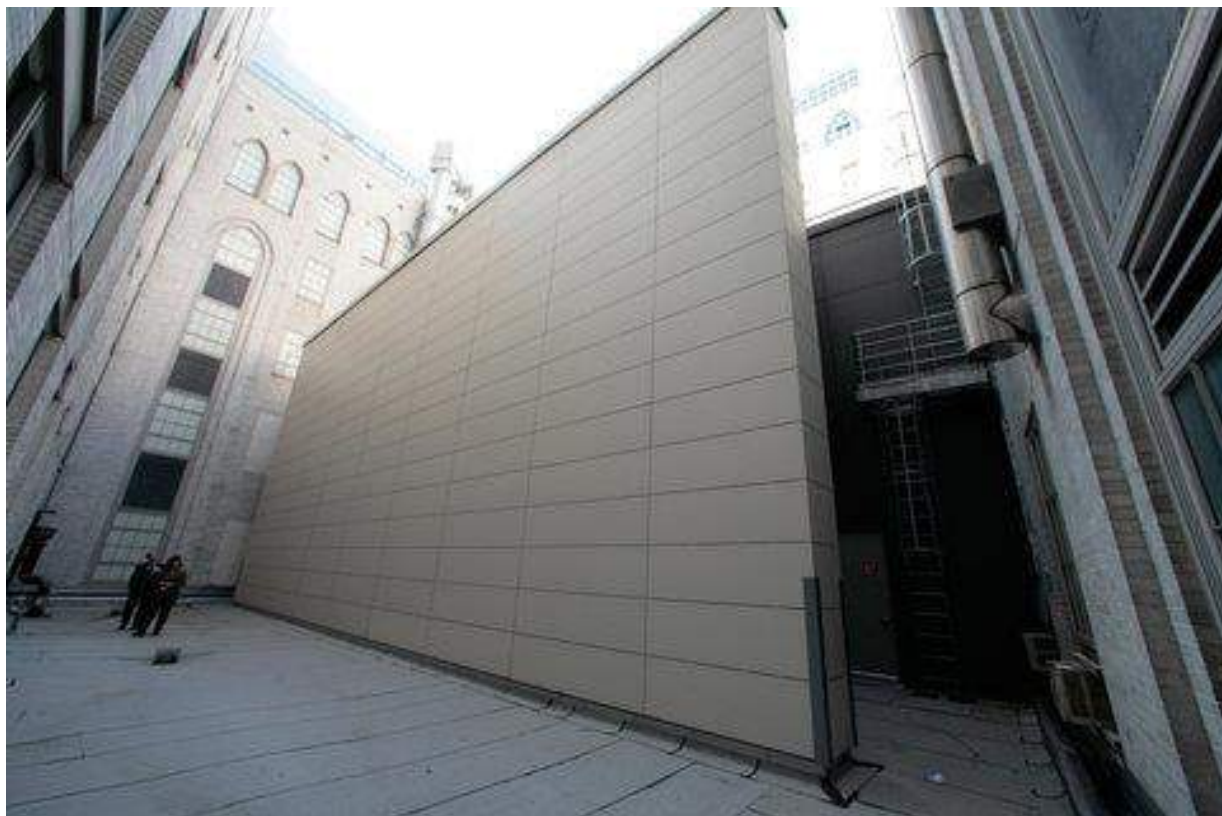


Realizing that the mural would be visible by people from the infant nursery on the seventh floor to the elderly in the cardiac unit, Mr. Oditá wanted it to represent the cycle of life, and give solace to viewers by helping them see their place in that cycle.

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

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

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



Librado Romero/The New York Times

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

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



KIASMA

GEORGES ADÉAGBO  
EIJÄ-LIISA AHTILA  
ARDMORE CERAMIC ART  
BRETT BAILEY  
SAMMY BALOJI  
URSULA BIEMANN  
BAABA JAKEH CHANDE  
KUDZANAI CHIURAI  
STEVEN COHEN  
EL ANATSUI  
SAMBA FALL  
ROTIMI FANI-KAYODE  
SAMUEL FOSSO  
PATRIZIA GUERRESI MAIMOUNA  
DITTE HAARLØV JOHNSEN  
ROMUALD HAZOUMÉ  
LAURA HORELLI  
PIETER HUGO  
ALFREDO JAAR  
ISAAC JULIEN  
MICHAEL MACGARRY  
VINCENT MEESSEN  
NANDIPHA MNTAMBO  
BAUDOUIN MOUANDA  
OTOBONG NKANGA  
KETTLY NOËL  
KATARIINA NUMMINEN  
ODILI DONALD ODITA  
EMEKA OGBOH  
ABRAHAM ONORIODE OGHOBASE  
J.D. 'OKHAI OJEIKERE  
ANDREW PUTTER  
ELINA SALORANTA  
MARY SIBANDE  
BARTHELEMY TOGUO

neue



# ODILI DONALD ODITA

Nigeria / USA

## ODILI DONALD ODITAN HAASTATTELU

Arja Miller

## INTERVIEW WITH ODILI DONALD ODITA

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

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

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

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

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

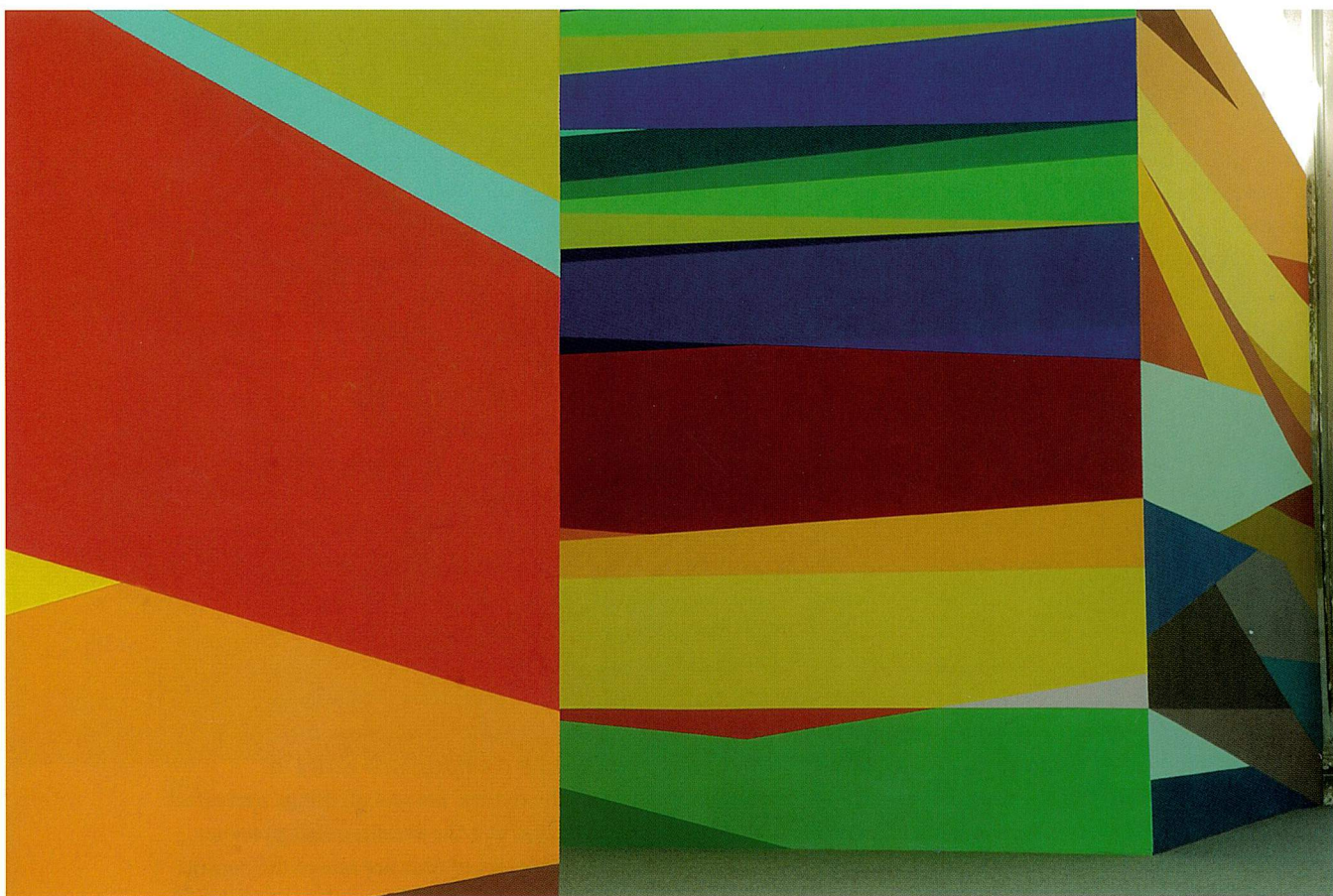
**ARJA MILLER** When you visited Kiasma in May 2010 to plan your wall painting for the ARS 11 exhibition, you carefully studied the forms of the building and observed its subtle details and paid attention to, for example, the triangle and a sail-like forms that are repeating in the architecture. You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

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

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

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

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



**Give Me Shelter**  
2007

52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale  
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman  
Gallery, NY with the support of  
the International Council of the Museum  
of Modern Art, New York  
Photographs : Giovanni Pancino



että käyttämäsi värit ikään kuin räjäyttävät hiljaiseen tilaan äänen?

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

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

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

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

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

**AM** Sanot taiteilijan lausumassasi että ”Tutkin teoksisiani maalauksen metaforista kykyä käsitellä ihmisyyttä toistuvien mallien, rakenteen ja muodonan-

niiksen avulla”.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Näkymä installaatiosta  
*Installation shot*

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

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





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

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

non kautta sekä sen kykyä synnyttää muistoja”. Voitko kertoa tästä lähemmin?

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

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

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

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

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

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

**ODO** I like to think of my work as a system running parallel with to humanist and social realities.

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

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

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

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

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

Käännös: Erik Miller



**ODILI DONALD ODITA  
INTERVIEWED BY ROBERT HOBBS**

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

ODO: Colour has become for me a way to explore perception while locating it as a construct within a social/cultural space. I am interested in looking at colour as a parallel to 'peoples of colour', for example, by basically taking the formal construct, colour, as a means for addressing this and other social circumstances. My return to painting was a 'why not' situation. Through my work as an independent curator and critic in the 1990s, I was able to visit

studios around the world and in the process gain great insight into the working methods of many artists. Ultimately, it did not make sense not to paint. During the time when I did not paint, I was working with photo-based methods and employing the ideas and properties of painting anyway. I thought like a painter, even when making the photo-based work, so it made even more sense to go back to painting and confront its limitations as positive, rather than as negative.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This point you bring up is what I like about colour – its contradictory nature. As a colour can be cool

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

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

What you are asking is interesting to me. I believe that colour can hold the condition of humanity within it, and not just describe things. For instance, [curator] Ann Temkin's exhibition *Color Chart* [at the Museum of Modern Art, New York] was troubling to me at first because I felt it reduced colour to serving as only a materialist insertion or description after the fact, but after speaking with her about it, I learned that she was using this notion of colour as a starting place to exploring how color expands beyond this point. And yes, I understand the history and use of colour as a spiritual device and as a means for recalling or realising the sublime, all of which may now be worn

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

out and devoid of meaning currently. But I also see colour, as Byron Kim and Glenn Ligon have seen it, as a means to address race through cultural and social relatedness. I am interested in colour's specificity and its difference, that is, the situation where colours can appear close to one another and yet still remain distinct. In addition, I look at colour's interaction with respect to the nature of people and things: I can say that colour's ongoing and subtly metaphoric situation is a quality that continues to hold my intellectual interests. So I can answer this by saying that when I look at colour, I am utilising specific constructs or notions of social classifications and social identifications, as much as memory and experience, to guide my colour decisions.

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

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

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

Another phenomenologically related question: when discussing the ways colour operates in your art – a tremendously difficult task for any artist working primarily with hue – you invoke its ability to create distinct cultural frames, referencing, in your words, “particular histories and societal lines”. Your language makes me think of Martin Heidegger and his emphasis on the impossibility of knowing anything in itself, even simple tools like hammers, and the necessity of approaching all objects through the specific lenses of

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

time and space, two terms often mentioned in your conversations and writing. While these references would place you and your work clearly in a Heideggerian perspective, you also have cited an alternative route for colour in the form of your prose poem, which I really like, the most relevant stanza being: “Colour does what it wants/ It misbehaves/ But most of all, / Colour can change our minds.” How do you reconcile this basic contradiction, and how do you think your work handles it? Would David Batchelor's neologism ‘chromophobia’ pertain to your goal to awaken people to the potential danger inherent in a semiotics predicated on hue?

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

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



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

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

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

Over the years, you have articulated your desire to be seen as an African artist and have contributed to the magazine *Nka*, which art historian and curator Okwui Enwezor primarily initiated in order to promote African

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Often in conversation you mention the importance of African fabrics for your work as well as an African colour sense, but you have not specified exactly what kind of fabrics. Are you interested in only locally produced ones? Or have you also embraced the colours found on the**

**many Dutch-wax printed cottons so popular in various West Coast African countries, textiles particularly important to the art of Yinka Shonibare, for example?**

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

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

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

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

This interview via email was completed in May 2011.

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

*Flame On*  
2012  
Acrylic on canvas  
213.5 x 264.5cm





*Plane Shifter*  
2012  
Acrylic on canvas  
178 x 228.5cm



# WSJ

THE WALL STREET

# AMERICANS

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



BY SARA RUFFIN COSTELLO PORTRAITS BY ALEX MAJOLI AND DARIA BIRANG



# ABROAD



## ELLSWORTH KELLY

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



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

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

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

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

those government buildings allows foreigners to have a glimpse of our cultural production."

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

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

changing in a way that's wonderfully permanent

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

The foundation's president, Eden Rafshoon, runs the D.C. office, underscoring Kelly's point about the effects of modern art. "Whether people understand it or not, its mere presence works subliminally. If it were there, people would feel differently." In that way, in our embassies program waves a less obvious cultural flag for America: proof that freedom of expression, opportunity, and unity through diversity are values which American artists stand for. ♦

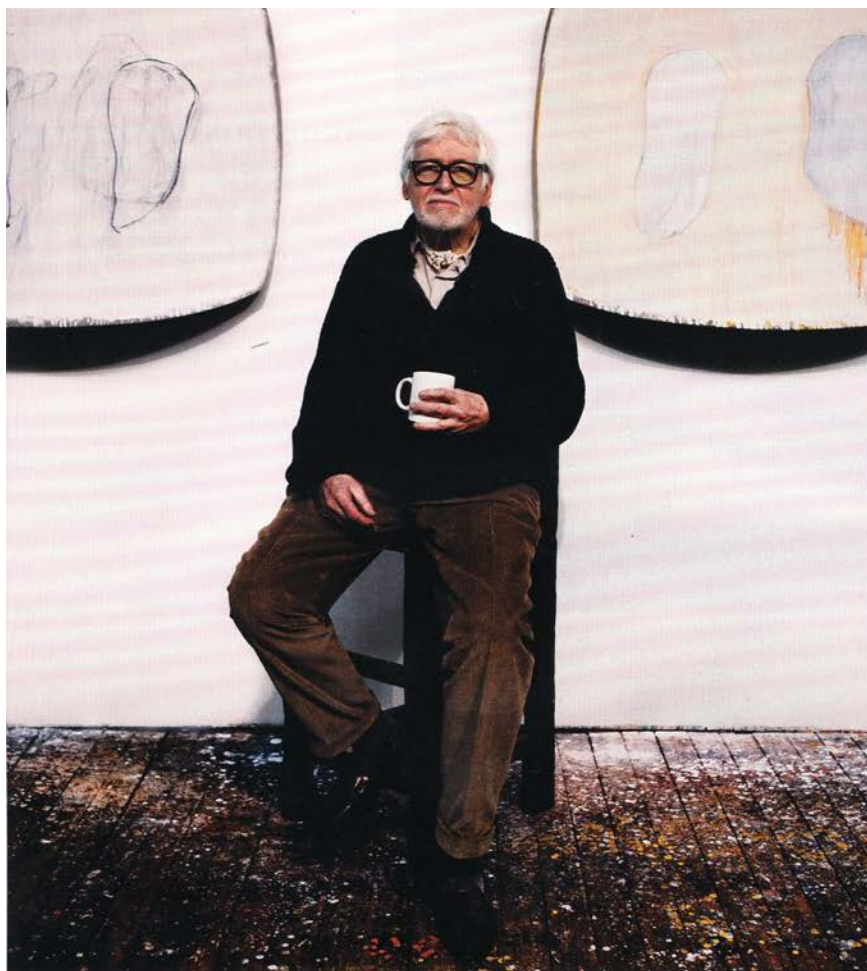
#### PATRON SAINT

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



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





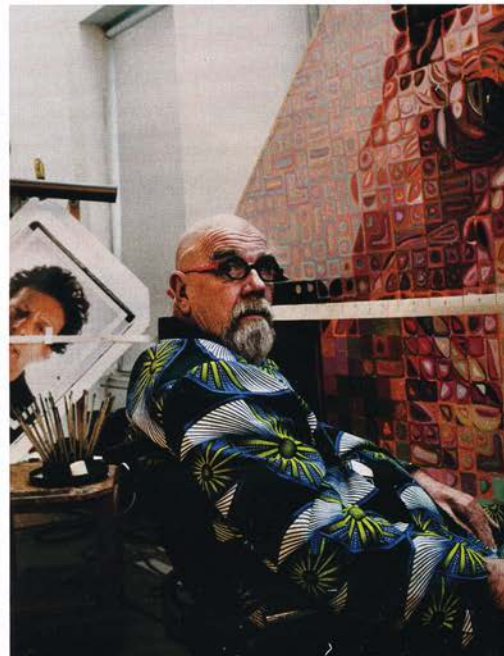
## RON GORCHOV

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



## CHUCK CLOSE

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

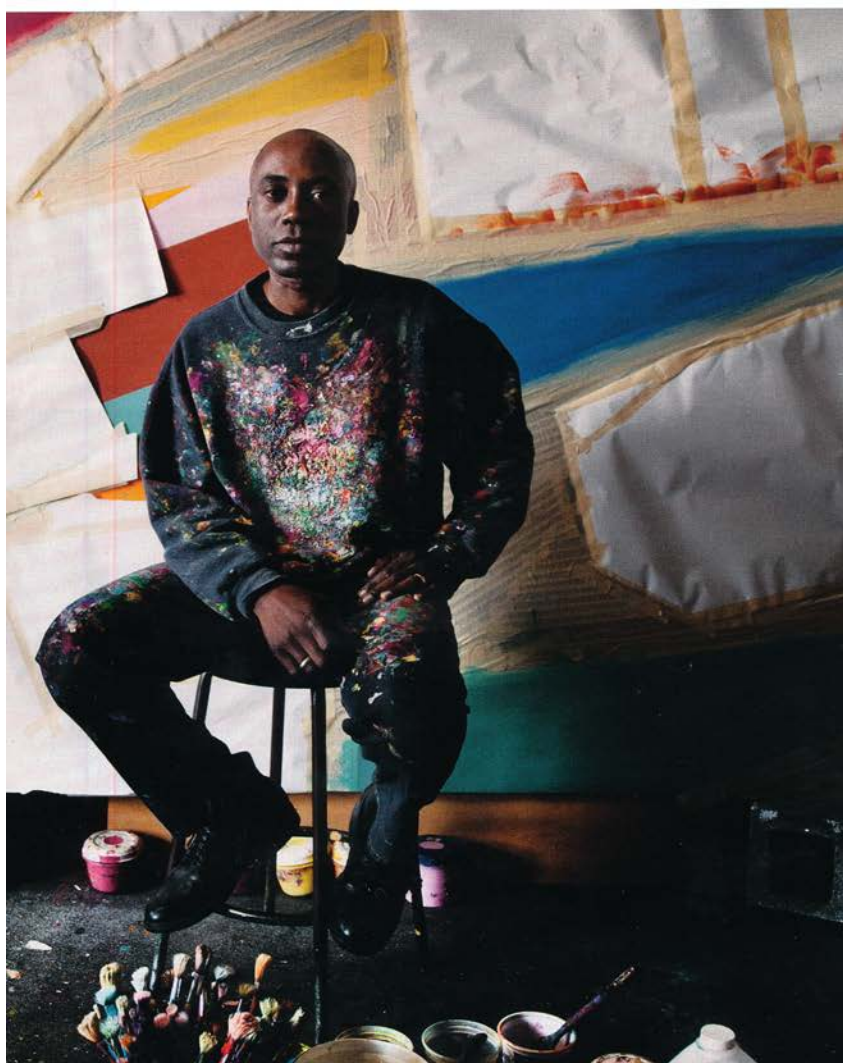






## ODILI DONALD ODITA

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

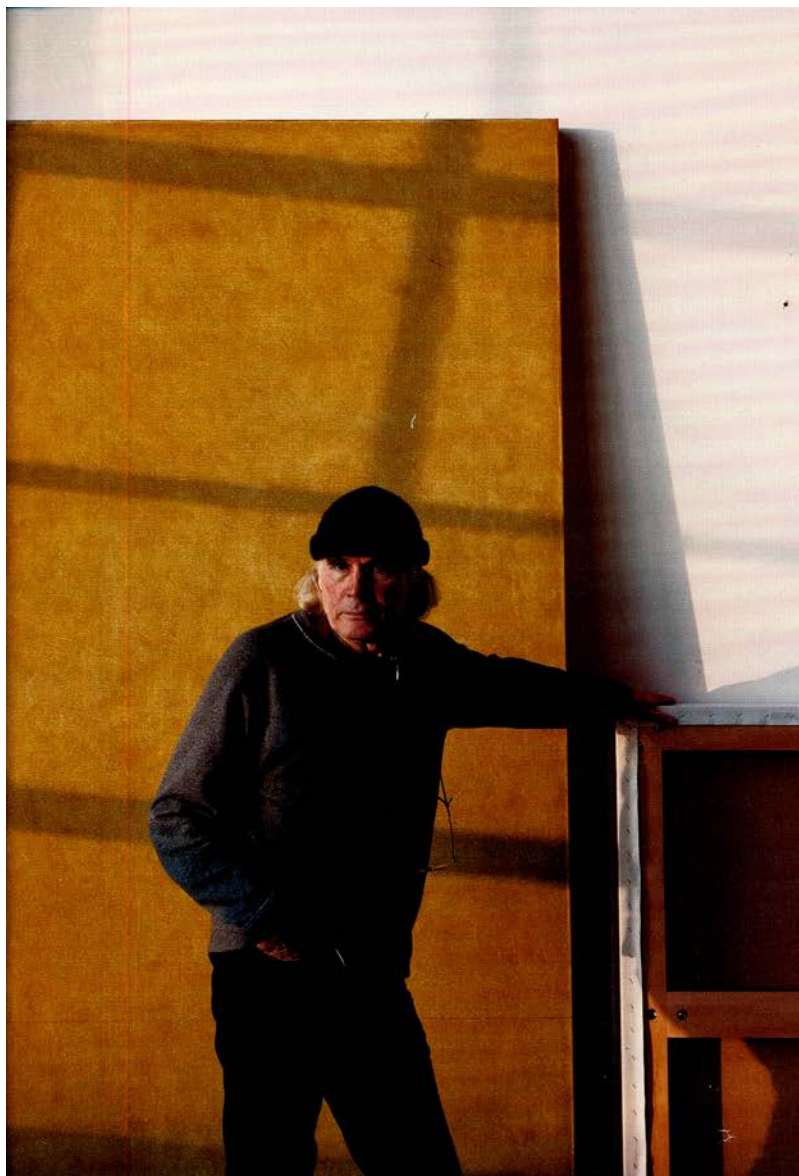






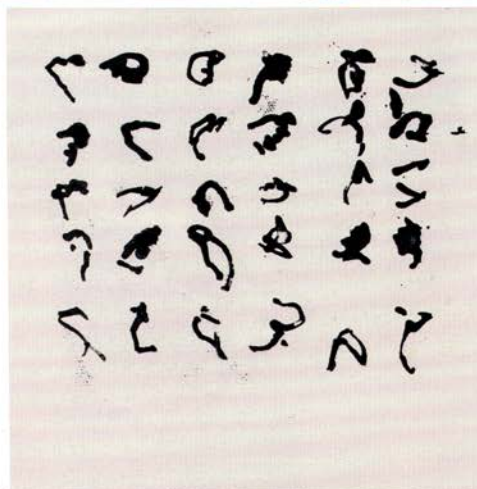
## CARRIE MAE WEEMS

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



## BRICE MARDEN

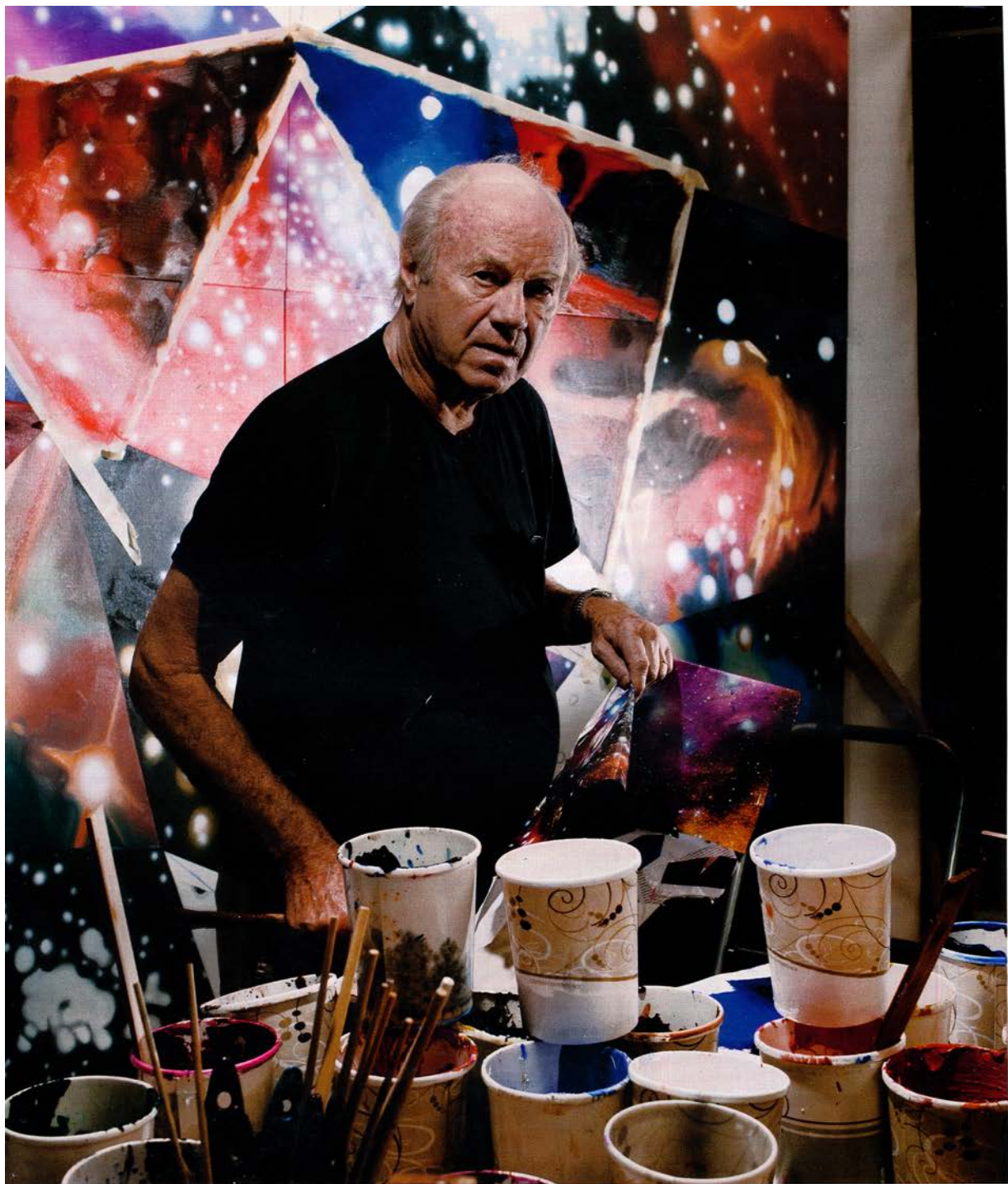
"I tend not to think that the government is a very good client, so I tend to avoid it—but it's an important client," says Marden, whose "First Etched Letter" was made in a limited edition of 50 prints. "It's a chance to place some of your work where people are going to see it. You make the work hoping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



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







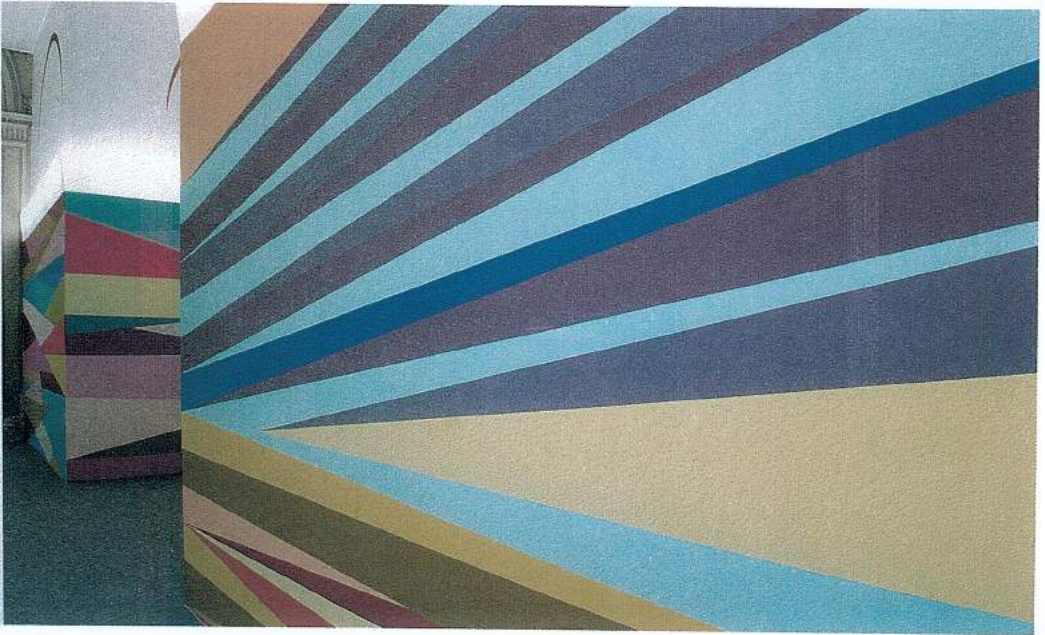
### JAMES ROSENQUIST

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

Defining  
Contemporary  
Art—25 years  
in 2000 pivotal  
artworks









**Odili Donald Odita**

*Give Me Shelter*

Acrylic latex wall paint and coloured pigment on wall

6 x 11 x 18 m

52nd Venice Biennale

● **Okwui Enwezor**

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

Odita's foray into this field announced a melding of diverse influences, from African-inflected geometric wall painting to the Cartesian rationalism of Constructivism and the disorienting visuality of 1960s Op art. His geometric paintings have often been conceived in relation to flat planes – walls and canvases – as their ground and support, with his paint application seemingly exhibiting no expressive intent, just the production of colours and shapes. The compositions are also predicated on the immediacy, and the heightening, of the spectator's phenomenological encounter with their strong shapes and intense colours. In terms of the works' formats and structures, one associates them with Sol LeWitt's monumental wall paintings or Bridget Riley's physiologically

dizzying abstractions. This places Odita among the ranks of contemporary artists, such as Jim Lambie and Karin Davie, whose practices have similarly made conceptual and formal use of geometric abstraction, especially those who place a premium on the conditions of spectatorship.

Conceived for and executed at the 2007 Venice Biennale, *Give Me Shelter's* distinctiveness is not only a result of its scale, which, like LeWitt's work, is designed to surround and absorb viewers. It also, in a manner analogous to Riley's wavy, listing lines, seeks to destabilize the spectator with its compositional complexity, chromatic vibrancy and spatial organization. In Venice this made for an active, architecturally lively experience. As the spectator entered the space, a kind of optical discharge occurred: a sensation of movement that pushed the viewer through the very motion that the painting depicts. Painting directly on the wall of a space that runs through the building like a spine bifurcating the Italian Pavilion on a north-south axis, Odita structured the work on two contradictory relations.

First, the flow of time, expressed in terms of the horizontal fluidity of stacked, zigzagged, crisscrossed and faceted verticals, horizontals, diagonals and overlapping lines; second, a series of mappings built on spatial structures consisting of units of primary colours.

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



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



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

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

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



1.



2.

3.



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

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

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

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

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



# SNWY

art.  
contemporary.  
african.

## **Edition 1 Featuring:**

Odili Donald Odita,  
Otobong Nkanga,  
Lynette Yiadom-Boakye,  
Simon Njami,  
Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie,  
Riason Naidoo,  
Chimurenga.

**(Re-) Mapping the field: a bird's eye view on discourses.**



## Chromatic Symphony

### Interview with Odili Donald Odita

Missla Libsekal

Interviewed by Missla Libsekal (Another Africa) and Ilpo Jauhiainen

Following his recent solo exhibition entitled *Body & Space* this past Autumn in New York, I had the pleasure of interviewing Nigerian-born (b. 1966 Enugu) abstract painter and hard-edged, colour field enthusiast Odili Donald Odita. His oeuvres, architectonic creations on canvas, plexiglass and wall drawings explore the mysteries of colour, its infinite possibilities considering colour anew - as a conceptual space. The journey discovering his work and thoughts behind his practice has been both intellectually and visually stimulating. His rigorous practice, specificity yet instinctual abandon to chromatic freedom create visual vistas ocularly titillating. Viewing his paintings in the flesh, one can easily find themselves lost in time, gazing and seeing different perspectives shapes and forms ultimately experiencing a renewed faith and love of colour.

During our recent telephone interview in December 2010, Odita spoke candidly of his work, his thoughts on colour how it marks, codifies and shapes our world, influences our understanding and perceptions whether it be at loftier heights such as in relation to socio-political constructs or to the mundane yet rather logical extrapolation as to why stop signs are typically red.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

**ODO:** But always remember that you have the colour from the monitor, colour from an image, and then you have colour entering your eyes from a natural light, from being outside, from being in the sunlight - there are multiple experiences. I'm interesting in the quality of colour generated from machine light, from mechanic light, like a computer or a TV light and what that does.

I am also interested in what happens with colour in nature under the sun, or in the atmosphere. Because I believe that when we experience colour, through our eyes, just through our eyes in the real world we are going to experience infinity - the infinite, the infinite potential - the infinite possibility. When we have man-made, mechanical light we are going to have another kind of experience, it's just going to be flatter, but it can be equally intense - different. Like an apple and an orange, it's just different. It's a different meaning and a different feeling. To be under a bright sun, outside on a brightly sunlit day or indoors in an intensely neon lit space or fluorescent space. It's just a different kind of experience, and I think that those experiences are equally intense and valid, and specific and I love that specificity of one verses the other because it talks about condition, and it talks about stage and it talks about state of mind.

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

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

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

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







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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### About the artist

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

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

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

#### Missla Libsekal

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

#### Ilpo Jauhiainen

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

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



## The Global Africa Project

### Museum of Arts and Design New York

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

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

'The Global Africa Project'  
2011  
Installation view

Serge Mouangue  
*wafrica*  
2008  
Cotton, silk and  
wax-printed kimono



on cotton/silk wax print designs (*wafrica*, 2008), or the lusty, sepia-toned painting of intertwined lovers by Iona Rozeal Brown. The real delight in viewing this exhibition is the individual pieces clamouring for attention.

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

As a survey exhibition, the surface is skimmed on many levels. Are artisans and designers from the African continent not enough to take centre stage? Or are those with distant and Romantic ties to Africa in need of validation? In an attempt not to generalize about an African aesthetic, there are significant arguments in support of including artists who have not visited the continent or lived there, but who use African elements in their work. In her catalogue essay, Judith Bettleheim discusses masquerading traditions that have retained an expressive use of materials, the confluence of patterns and design and the significance of spectacle. Sonya Clark, for example, who has studied the material culture and philosophy of the Yoruba, creates head and neckpieces that reflect her understanding of key Ifa precepts. A fairly recent development is the use of

recycled materials, but has that not always been an indigenous African tendency? Masking traditions are kept contemporary because of materials used to construct the costumes; notable contemporary African artists like Willie Bester and El Anatsui use commercial discards from factories, cars and assorted detritus revealing a fluid connection between traditions and modernity. Futurism is represented in the space-age design of Kossi Assou's triangular, low-sitting table, replete with chairs and aluminium bowls (*Triangle Table*, 2003). Everything in this piece is stripped to the bare essentials like a post-apocalyptic dining scene.

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

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

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

A.M. Weaver





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

## ODILI DONALD ODITA

JACK SHAINMAN

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

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

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

by lapping onto adjacent walls or the vaulted ceiling so that the corners seemed torqued and spatial order dissolved in color and motion.

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

—Janet Koplos

## “Wild Is the Wind”

### SAVANNAH COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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

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

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

— Rebecca Dimling Cochran

ARTFORUM

**Odili Donald Odita**

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

513 West 20th Street

November 18–December 23



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

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

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

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

— Ian Bourland



## EDITOR'S PICK

## In New York: Gallery Openings This Week

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

Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



By Emma Allen, Andrew M. Goldstein

Published: November 17, 2010

**Odili Donald Odita, "Body & Space" at Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20 Street, through December 23, opening Thursday, November 18, 6-8 p.m., [jackshainman.com](http://jackshainman.com)**

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

Friday, February 26, 2010

## FRI 26 | 'Africa On My Mind'



*Odili Donald Odita/Michael Stevenson, Cape Town*

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

THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN ART



BEING RICHARD A. LONG  
THE LIFE, THE ODDESSY

BEARDEN & WOMEN

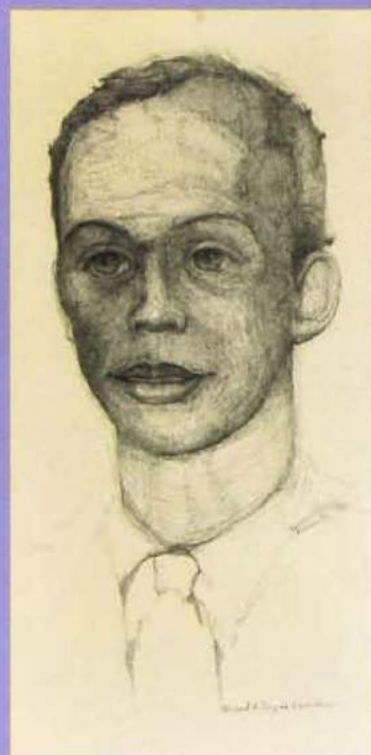
LOUIS B. SLOAN

LOWERY SIMS

DONALD ODITA ODILI

MAYA FREELON

ART & HEALING



VOLUME 22 NUMBER 3



# ODILI DONALD ODITA

## PAINTING AND THE ABSTRACT TRUTH

by Lara Taubman

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(The Torch Song painting is) "a song of lament, of unrequited love. So I wanted the red to be a certain tone, to be a flame that gets extinguished as soon as it flares. That's why I brought the pink in and intensified the orange colors...."*

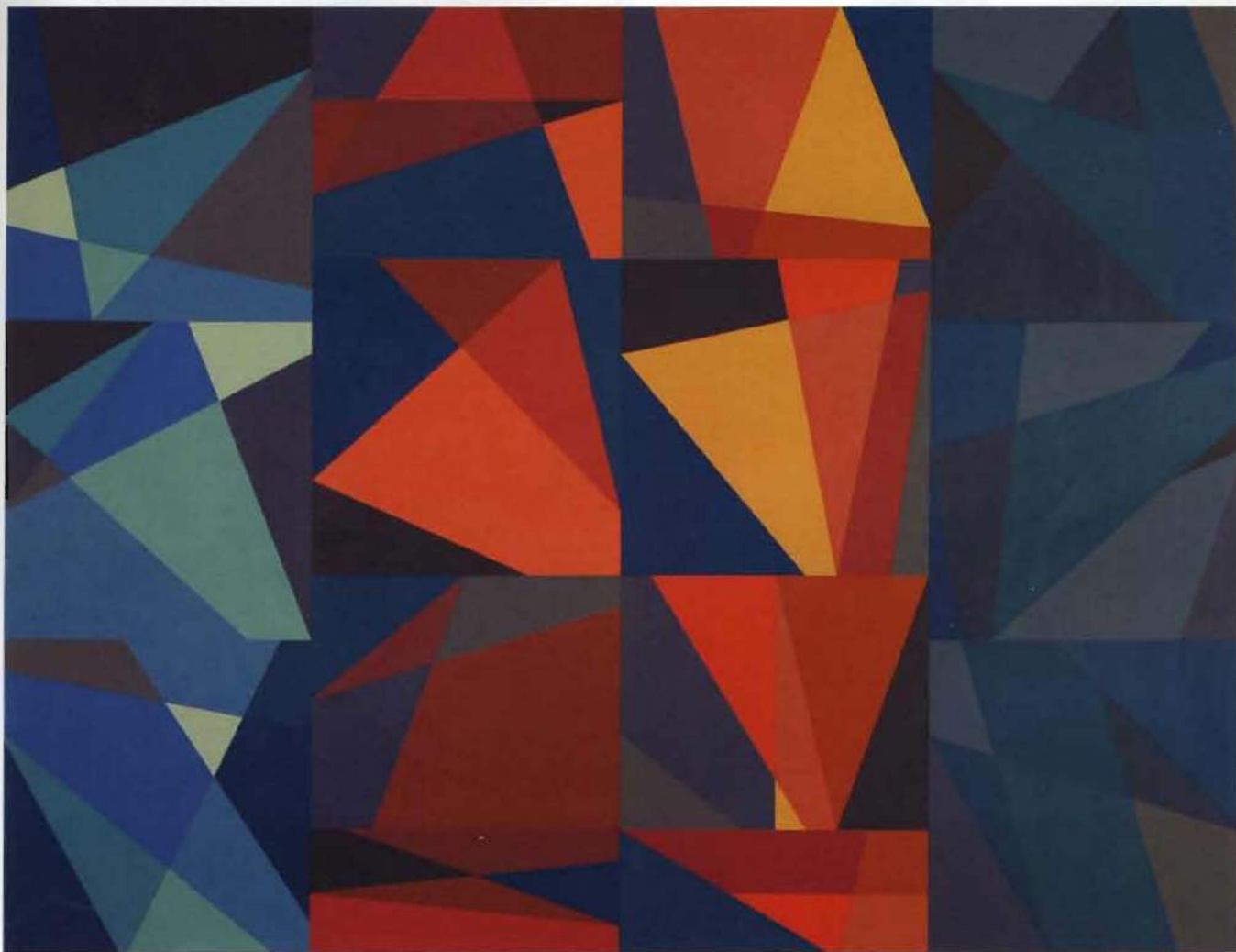
*(Double Edge) has a blues narrative that permeates the work. On the one hand, there is color as the point*

*before language, as some sort of pure state. But it's boring. If it stays there. Color can't stay in its own contained state; it has to breathe into other things. Color is not merely material, it's psychological. That's the double edge.*

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

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

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



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





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

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

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





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

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



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

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

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

## GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

DJ is an ethnic fusion: Nigerian and Romanian; fair, fearless leader; bobbing his head as the crowd reacts to a sample of *Sweet Mother*.

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



Senam Okudzeto  
Untitled (Large Reclining Nude)  
2002/3  
acrylic on Somerset paper  
160 x 208 cm

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MICHAEL STEVENSON, CAPE TOWN



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

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

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

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

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

to honor what is unique. Rather than essentializing the geographical entity, we seek to comprehend its cultural complexity; to honor its intellectual and spiritual legacies; to sustain our parents' values.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## LONDON SEEN

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

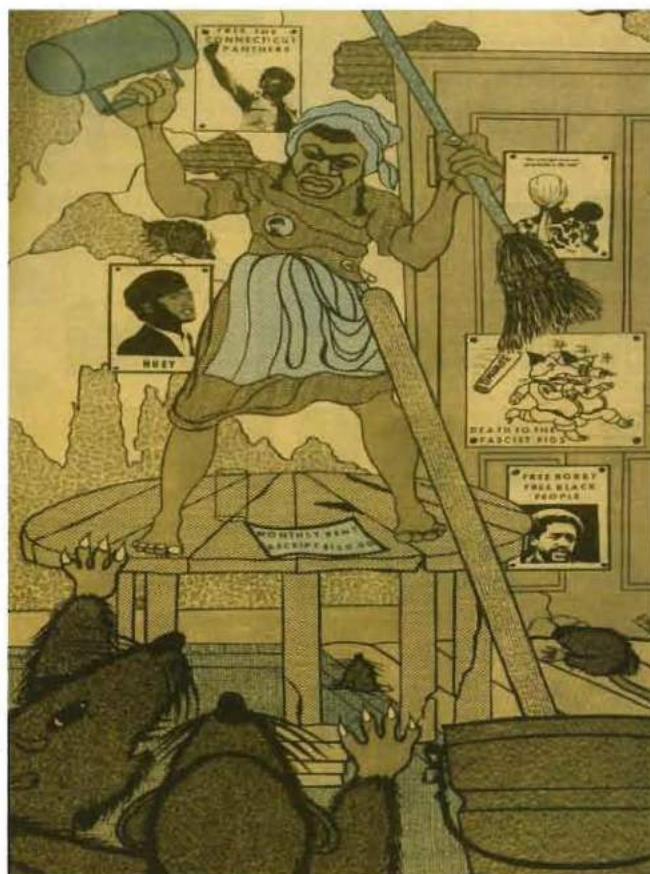
When candidate Barack Obama visited London in July of 2008, he was warmly welcomed. Obama’s subsequent election was perceived in England, as elsewhere, as the fruition of the Civil Rights Movement. When the former Black Panther minister of culture Emory Douglas visited the city of Manchester in January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

The question reflects a consolidation of a range of struggles that today inform communities worldwide. The Urbis exhibition *Black Panther: Emory Douglas and the Art of Revolution* recognized Douglas as “an unsung hero of the modern civil rights movement.” Curator Pollyanna Clayton Stamm focused the Black Panther history against a backdrop of late 1960s political events. The exhibition displayed pages of *The Black Panther* newspaper, posters, period photographs of the Black Panthers by Stephen Shames and from the personal collection of Pirkle Jones, along with recent paintings by Douglas. This differed from Sam Durant’s presentation of Douglas’ work “Within the Black Power Movement” in an earlier exhibition at Los Angeles MOCA and associated monograph, *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007). In the monograph, Kathleen Cleaver, Amiri Baraka, Colette Gaiter,

and others discuss Douglas’ activities in relation to their own, conveying the distinct philosophies informing the various organizations at the time. Both projects highlighted Douglas’s work and influence as the graphic editor of the Party’s newspaper, *The Black Panther*, published from 1967 until 1979.

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

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



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





# The *seduction* of order

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

A.M. Weaver

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

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

colour. This background marked Odita's initial brush with colour-field painting, in particular the works of Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Morris Louis; however, he cites the work of Frank Stella, Peter Halley and Josef Albers as being the most influential. Exposed to the activities of various conceptualists active in New York, he initially ventured into photo-based installations, but eventually settled on painting. Asked to crystallise his thoughts on this medium, Odita says: "Painting is something that advances its own form and can advance possibilities of consideration and of existence... it is my means of [articulating] my own purpose, my own sense of

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

intellectual purpose and drive." In many senses, Odita's painterly oeuvre, which ranges from small canvases to large site-specific installations, describes a dialogue between self and reality. Dominant as a force in these paintings is Odita's striking use of colour, especially in his large installation works. His arresting palette is derived in part from his upbringing in suburban America. During the 1960s and 70s, homes were painted in pastel colours in order to personalise the generic architecture. An avid fan of television and comic books, Odita was influenced by the chromatic colours that appeared at the end of a broadcasting day on television. He uses a myriad of acrylic paints and chooses his colours carefully for each painting. His enormous canvas work, *Pulse* (2006) – it measures 152.4 x 203.2cm – functions as a large echocardiograph: the horizontal movement of angulated marks and shapes conveys the energy of a recorded life force in rose, mauve and muted crimson. Latent and active force fields converge in Odita's use of vibrant and subdued tertiary colours, combined within angular clusters. Allen Leepa, in a critical anthology on minimalist art published in 1968, describes the 'reality' of minimalism as existing at the meeting point of the inner and outer worlds *in* the painting and not in the mind's eye of the observer. He further explains that the objective of

the minimalist artist is to provide clarity and consider the essential aspects of perception. "Minimal art is seen as an effort to deal as directly as possible with the nature of experience and its perception through visual reactions," adds Leepa. Odita's work is hard to place categorically. However, he does follow some minimalist doctrines in that his marks are based on geometric forms and the flat application of paint is vigilantly measured within taped areas across the canvas. He uses clusters of angulated shapes to construct his canvases. A recent work, *Night's Door*, has the appearance of analytical cubism; he fragments and breaks down his shapes so that sections overlap forming trapezoids and quadrilateral planes. Influenced by his environment and systems of design and pattern, Odita distils his perception within two dimensions that often extend outward, defining an architectonic space. In recent years, Odita has produced a number of site-specific installations, notably his installation at the entrance to curator Robert Storr's exhibition, *Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind*, at last year's Venice Biennale. I want to discuss two of these architecturally orientated interventions, both exhibited in the United States last year: *Equalizer*, staged in the Project Room of Harlem's Studio Museum, and *Flow*, presented in the CAC Kaplan Hall of Cincinnati's Contemporary Art Center. Both bring to mind public works by Gene Davis and, more recently, Jim Lambie, a contemporary of Odita. All three artists share a singular, distinctive affinity: colour. Lambie traces rooms in his floor installations and is concerned with the optical plays of colour. While optics is a concern for Odita, he vacillates between using subdued tones and colours in conjunction with dynamic applications of colour that vibrate and shift position in relationship to each other. The interplay of his angular shapes further impacts an overall sense of place. Rather than going for a psychedelic effect, his compositions subtly alter the experience of a room; colour, shape and the direction of Odita's marks determine spatial relationships. Picture windows enhance the unique qualities of *Flow*, which can be viewed internally and externally. In developing plans for this installation, Odita spent time in Kaplan Hall at different times of the day, taking notes on the bustling activity and traffic around the structure; his observations, rendered in sketch form, are reflected in the subsequent installation, which draws on a palette of more than 100 colours. I visited Odita's studio in Philadelphia, not only to meet the artist in person but also gain insight into the polemical positions and aesthetic attitudes that define contemporary African art. His studio is orderly with shelves full of acrylic paints. While his assistant



aggressively taped areas of his canvas in preparation for adding additional colours, we discussed the position of the presumed marginality of the African artist and his/her journey toward being part of a global art movement. Odita feels that as an African raised in the American mid-west he has taken the entire complex of being black in America and created a cultural product. Odita came of age as an artist when the work of African American conceptual artists Glenn Ligon, Fred Wilson and Leonardo Drew were gaining widespread attention. At this time, Odita joined forces with two fellow Nigerian expatriates, the painter and scholar Olu Oguibe and curator Okwui Enwezor, helping to establish *Nka*, a magazine focused on art from Africa and the African Diaspora. Along with artist Coco Fusco, New York gallerist Skoto, artist and writer Ike Ude, curator Octavio Zaya, and scholar Salah Hassan, Odita engaged in dialogues that shaped the scope of the magazine. "The imperative was to give contemporary African art a currency, an urgency that made it be seen as serious as the most cutting-edge art forms being produced in the art world," says Odita. Before settling into his current medium, for a period of about five years starting in 1993, Odita produced photo-based installations. However, he always

painted and by 1998 began to devote all of his energy to a mode of painting that some view as steeped in twentieth century modernism, a history that has roots based, in part, on work from African antiquity. "My work, in a way, deals with a certain revisionist critique without necessarily being only about that," he says. Odita's work evidences elements of traditional African aesthetic: the chevron designs of the Kuba, the colour palette of Kente clothe. In conversation, he cites linear and design orientated Uli body art and painting as a reference, which the Nsukka School of thought used as a foundation for its radical practice of artmaking. The actions of Nigeria's Zaria Society predate the activities of the Nsukka School by a decade. In the 1950s, vanguard artists such as Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo and Demas Nwoko began to experiment with abstracted elements, shifting from the prevalent naturalistic style that, up until then, had followed a European mode. (Of note, Odita's father, Okechukwu Emanuel Odita, was a member of the Zaria Society.) During the 1970s, the advent of the Nsukka School eventually became the official art of the nation. It has been the recent thrust of Nsukka to promulgate a postmodern agenda. Odita's work parallels that of recent adherents to Nsukka, who are concerned



with how contemporary African art transports itself in the world. His works are philosophically grounded in interpretations that range from direct observation of the interplay between light and colour to the pictorial allegory of migration from Africa to America, as in *Equalizer*. Although not formally tied to Uli, there are indeed political overtones to the underlying explanations of his imagery. In his 1999 essay, 'Between Worlds: Postmodernism and African Artists in the Western Metropolis', Okwui Enwezor proposes paradigms that have shaped discussions on the challenges confronted by African artists working in, and informed by their presence in western cultural capitals. In this essay Enwezor analyses how identity is mediated through the quest to embrace a "new politics of difference". The cultural world of the African artist in the west, Enwezor states, "represents a plural universe built from the multiplicity of frames that aspire towards the creation of new territories". He uses the term postmodern

throughout the text to imply the flux and ambiguity that surrounds the present moment in history. At best this term encompasses an inclusive aesthetic operating from a de-centred core with ample room for the multivalent explorations of artists once considered other or marginalised. Odita operates within this context. Odita pursues an idea of artistic freedom through abstraction, and his work attempts to push the viewer's vision beyond the formal categories of pure colour and form. "I have been able to find an understanding of freedom and all that this can entail through the notion of possibilities, an aspect inherent and intrinsic [to my] process of painting," he says. His work appeals to the intellectually tenacious viewer who is willing to look deeply for its essence in African tradition, modernity and a transnational visual aesthetic.

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





# 52nd VENICE Biennale 2007

## Top Ten

by Christine Y. Kim, Associate Curator



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



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



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



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



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



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



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



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



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



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