

ARTFORUM

Toyin Ojih Odutola

MUSEUM OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

From the outset, Toyin Ojih Odutola's solo exhibition "A Matter of Fact" makes visitors complicit in its fabulist conceit. What we are about to see, an introductory wall panel announces, is the "private collection of rarely exhibited portraits depicting the UmuEze Amara family," a

fictional aristocratic Nigerian clan, the portrayals of whom purportedly span two hundred years. The eighteen pieces on view, all made with charcoal, pastel, and pencil, and most of them life-size portraits, provide clues to the family's histories—its proclivities, its relationships, and, above all, its members' *tastes*. Rather than posing as the clan's in-house portraitist, Ojih Odutola casts herself as "private secretary" to the family's queer patriarchs (who are presented as the show's curators, and whose portrait, *Newlyweds on Holiday* [all works 2016], hangs just outside the gallery proper).

Whether portraying queer intimacy or resisting uncomplicated hagiographic depictions of her subjects, Ojih Odutola has long challenged assumptions regarding black life. "A Matter of Fact" is less a departure from than an expansion of the artist's now-signature treatment of black skin: Heavily inked markings render black faces as light and motion. While her previous

portraits were closely cropped, their subjects set against empty backgrounds, the new ones are looser, larger, their subjects' surrounds more narrative driven. Ojih Odutola has widened her lens and shifted our attention from skin to body; her figures' personae and experiences are additionally revealed by their positioning within luxe interiors. Richly colored and full of detail and texture, the show manages to be at once studied and imaginative, thought-provoking and playful. Ojih Odutola began this series following a two-month residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts in California's Marin County. It is thus fitting that "A Matter of Fact" debuts at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora, a venue that has grown increasingly innovative in its curatorial practice and programming over the past few years. Opened as a cultural heritage center and educational museum in late 2005, MOAD has recently turned its attention to contemporary work by artists of African descent. "A Matter of Fact" is one of the most robust manifestations of this new direction.

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

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

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

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

—Leigh Raiford



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

T MAGAZINE

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young African Immigrant

By TAIYE SELASI MAY 8, 2017

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Toyin Ojih Odutola

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

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

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

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



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

— Kim Beil

DAILYSERVING

AN INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

January 11, 2017 Written by [Maria Porges](#)

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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



LEFT: Toyin Ojih Odutola. *Casual Full Dress*, 2016; charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper; 62 x 42 in. (paper), 66 x 47 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 2 in. (framed). Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

RIGHT: Toyin Ojih Odutola. *Last Dance at the Annual County Gala*, 2016; charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper; 77 x 42 in. (paper), 82 x 47 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 2 in. (framed). Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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

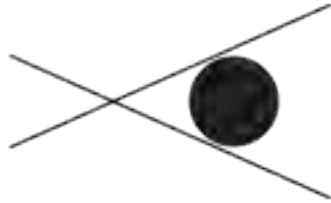


Toyin Ojih Odutola, *A Matter of Fact*; installation view, Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, October 26, 2016–April 2, 2017. Photo: jka.photo.

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

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

aperture



Vision & Justice

Sarah Lewis

In 1916, my grandfather was expelled in the eleventh grade in New York City for asking where African Americans were in the history books. He refused to accept what the teacher told him, that African Americans had done nothing to merit inclusion. He was expelled for his so-called impertinence. His pride was wounded that he never went back to high school. Instead, he went on to become a jazz musician and a painter, inserting images of African Americans in scenes where he thought they should—and knew they did—exist. The endeavor to affirm the dignity of human life cannot be waged without pictures, without representational justice. This, he knew.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Bottom:
Awol Erizku, *Untitled*
(*Forces of Nature #1*), 2014
© Condé Nast, 2014.
Courtesy Vogue.com

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Vision & Justice



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

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

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

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

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

NYLON

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

And emphasizes "being alone and working on yourself"

BY SYDNEY GORE FEBRUARY 26, 2017



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

available to us.”

What steps did you take to develop your craft professionally?

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

What was your undergraduate experience like?

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

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

What motivated you after graduate school?

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

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

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

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

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

During this difficult period of social injustice, activists are also calling on artists to create. What keeps you inspired to continue practicing your craft?

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

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

What do you do when you hit a creative block?

“Whenever I feel like it is too hard to create, when the energy and motivation aren’t there, I take a breather. I take a break. I don’t try to force anything. So, if someone were to ask me to be political simply for the sake of it—without intention, without proper thought—I take a step back to reconsider, to take the time before rushing into an idea that I don’t fully understand. In short, I go to work in my own way. I think that’s for the best. I like to work incrementally, and I understand that not everyone has a quick answer to problems, or even an answer at all. In the act of working, I am practicing my own political act and I’m learning; I choose not to compare what I am doing with the acts of others. The fact that I am still working, still taking risks, still figuring things out is something I savor more than anything, because what my work brings for me is the freedom to investigate ideas and express that in my drawings and that is something not everyone has the luxury of doing.”

Can you further elaborate on this tweet?

“That tweet was written in solidarity with the Women’s March that happened worldwide on January 21. I wanted to express pride in what was happening and how seminal this moment was in our time. It was an amazing gesture, but it was also a reflective point for many of us. If anything, I hoped for the message to inspire and to show that even a delayed cognizance of self does not mean it is any lesser than one that arrived earlier. What I am interested in most is how to become a better person through it all and that comes from paying attention and listening to people—not listening only to wait for your turn to speak—to actually try and understand a situation and ruminate on it. I have my impatient moments like the rest of them, but I often find that when I am still and contemplative, trying to give time to what is going on around me, it helps considerably. I do not feel confident enough to give proper advice on this matter because I am still learning, but what I can say from experience is that through the struggles comes knowledge and I think it is through knowledge that we come to better understand who we are as people.”

What have been some of the highlights of your career so far?

“There are two moments I can think of—they both involve my parents. My parents have and always will be my heroes and the standard with which I live my life. I often think of them when I am working and how best to do right by them. So, the first moment would have to be seeing their reactions to my work showing in my first ever New York solo exhibition at my art dealer’s, Jack Shainman’s, space in Chelsea. When I first told them of the show, I was still in graduate school, and it must have sounded like something out of another world. But the moment they arrived and stepped through the gallery to see their daughter’s work, it was something special. My father, especially, started welling up. He couldn’t believe this was his child’s artwork on the walls. I’ll never forget that feeling of pride emanating from them as it was also the beginning of my career as an artist professionally. There was so much possibility looking ahead—neither they nor I could have imagined what was to come.

“Fast forward to the second moment, which came last year, when I got the email from the head curator of drawings and prints from the Museum of Modern Art in New York informing me that the department had just purchased my drawing, ‘The Raven,’ from 2016, and would now include the work in its permanent collection. To say I was floored is an understatement. I was completely out of body. I recalled telling my parents as an undergraduate, when they asked me why I wanted to continue pursuing my art making, that I wanted them to see a major museum in this country house an Ojhi Odutola work and display it on their wall and that they would know our story and they will remember our names. When I phoned my parents upon receiving the news, my mother burst into tears and my

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

What are you hoping to accomplish as a creative?

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

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

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

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

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



Toyin Ojih Odutola

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | 513 WEST 20TH STREET

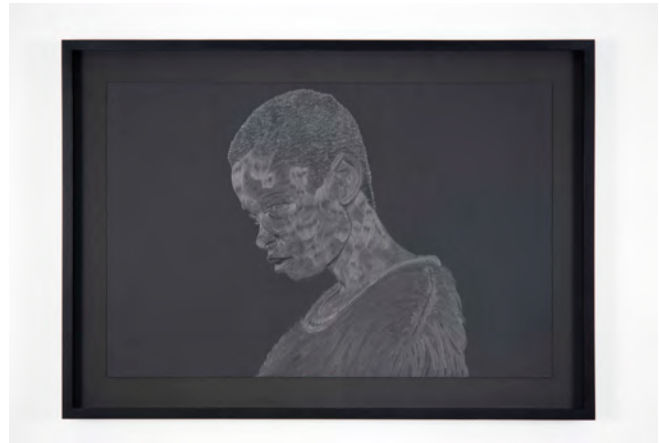
513 West 20th Street

December 11–January 30

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

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

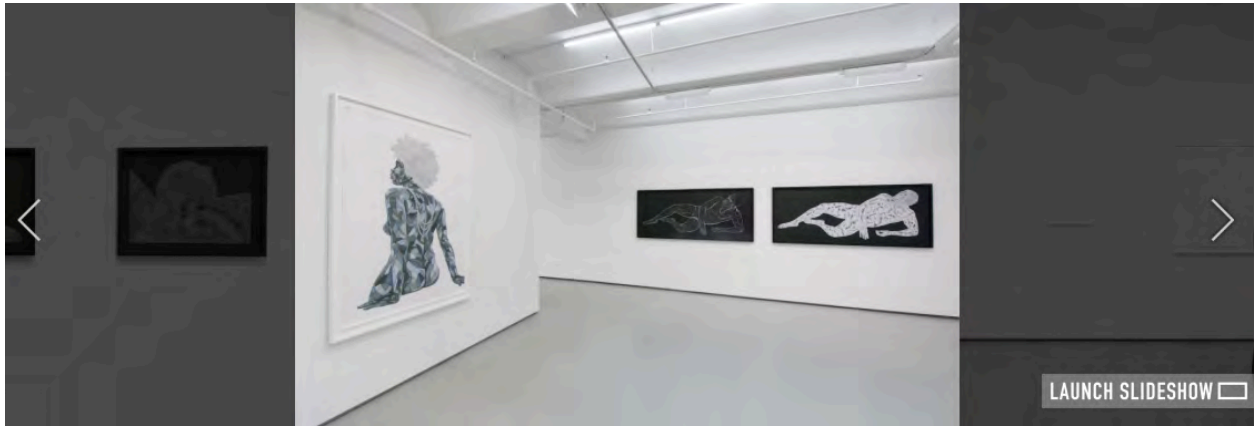
Elsewhere, the beauty typical of Odutola's figures gives way to a more menacing and spectral cast: With their piercing kaolin tones, the subject's eyes in *Fabric Free Lives* are at once transfixing and wraithlike; similarly, in *Soil Erosion*, musculature is rendered gelid and orphic, as luminescent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



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

— Ian Bourland

whitewall



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

EMORY LOPICCOLO *January 26, 2016*

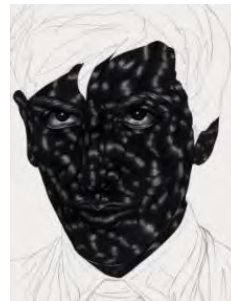
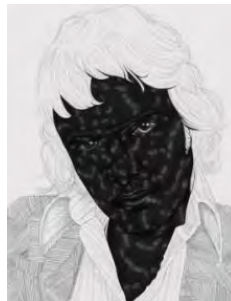
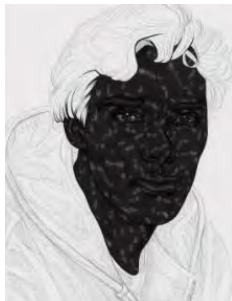
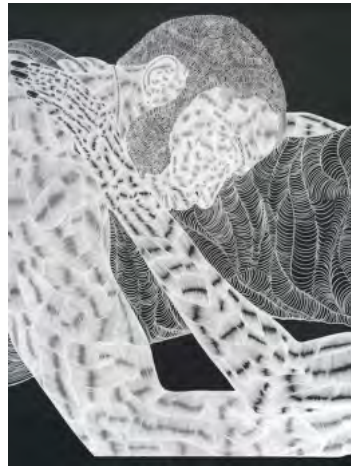
Interview

ART

TRAVELING WITH TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA

By EMILY MCDERMOTT
Photography VICENTE MUÑOZ

Published 12/21/15



TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA IN NEW YORK, DECEMBER 2015. PORTRAITS:
[VICENTE MUÑOZ](#).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MCDERMOTT: Were you sourcing images online?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MCDERMOTT: So are these white subjects?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MCDERMOTT: Why did you chose to do it?

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

MCDERMOTT: When did you decide to leave color behind?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

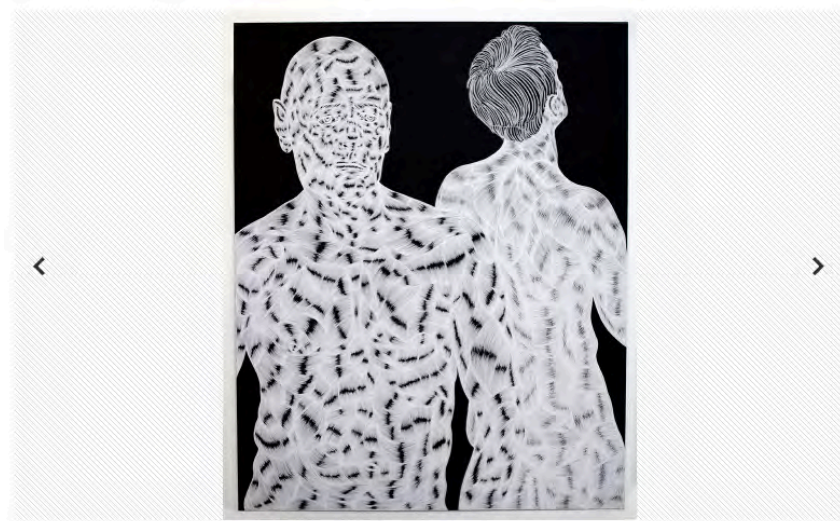
MCDERMOTT: It's not weird at all. If you stay one place, it becomes boring. You have to leave your bubble.

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

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

Toyin Ojih Odutola explores race and identity in black and white

Art / 8 Dec 2015 / By Michael Slenske



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

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

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

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

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

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



‘What I really loved is that when you use black as a demarcating tool and replace it with white it suddenly makes things really, really slippery and people get uncomfortable because they can’t delineate anything,’ she says. Pictured: (L) *Quality Control*, 2015, marker and pencil on paper, and (R) *The Treatment 14*, 2015, pen ink, gel ink and pencil on paper

After seeing a commentator on a CNN panel discuss the problem of seeing images of Michael Brown as a concept — instead of a person — ‘that hit me like a ton of bricks. We’re not even looking at all these people, we’re just seeing them as ideas,’ says Ojih Odutola. ‘Once you put blackness on someone you don’t even see them, the blackness is an obfuscating element that obstructs anything that’s behind.’ To redirect the conversation she began a series of drawings, dubbed *The Treatment*, of famous white men — whose identities she prefers not to reveal — with black faces and simple pencil outlines for their hair and clothes that transform these iconic visages into anonymous mugs.

‘The reason for my seeming evasiveness towards readily identifying things is because it feels like the act itself is a disservice,’ says Ojih Odutola. ‘To immediately identify means to give a swooping read, something singular and not at all multifaceted, which is what the actually mark-making of my work has always been about: the multifaceted nature of people, things, and situations.’ Two dozen of these are installed at Shainman’s 20th Street gallery.

In one final play on identity, the artist’s includes renderings of herself. One is a white charcoal self-portrait that was titled *Subway Selfie (Or be Thankful to Exist)*, which addresses the need to capture ourselves. The second is larger-than-life-sized marker piece of a nude Ojih Odutola, originally titled *What’s on offer* but is now called *The Object is the Technique + The Technique is the Object* (after a Francis Bacon quote).

‘I love the idea of that quote because it’s about image and not about me. I want the marks to be the subject,’ she says, admitting, ‘I’m exposing a lot in this show. In particular, I’m exposing my process but I am doing this because I want people to see what I see in the makings of these works that often doesn’t get shown in the final product. It’s like I’m welcoming them into my studio for a moment with each drawing.’

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Stunning Ballpoint Imagery Explores Blackness And The Power Of Ink

Toyin Ojih Odutola bends color and perception.

Claire Fallon | Books and Culture Writer, The Huffington Post

12/09/2015 08:56 am ET



Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

In the practical world, there are myriad shades of black. Anyone who's struggled with slightly mismatched black jackets and pants knows this to be true.

For artist Toyin Ojih Odutola, this quandary doesn't frustrate: It inspires.

In an August 2013 interview, the Nigerian-American portraitist [recalled a moment of revelation](#): "I'm doing black on black on black, trying to make it as layered as possible in the deepness of the blackness to bring it out. I noticed the pen became this incredible tool. The black ballpoint ink on blackboard would become copper tone and I was like, 'Wow, this isn't even black at all!'"

Layering shades and types of black media, she realized, could bend how the colors presented in surprising ways. "The blackboard was like this balancing platform for the ink to become something else," she said.

"Ballpoint pen ink is the reason I draw the way that I do," Ojih Odutola told The Huffington Post

via email. Though in the past decade of work she's incorporated other media such as charcoal and marker into her repertoire, she's continued to explore the themes of skin, blackness and perception in her portraiture.

"Growing up in America as a black individual," said Ojih Odutola, who was born in Ife, Nigeria, and later moved to the U.S., "you can walk into any room and your skin is the first read. From this reality, I treat the skin of my subjects as an arena to expose contradictions -- to expand and constrict."

Her portraits, whether of white or black subjects, layer white on white and black on black, bringing out the texture and sheen of the skin rather than the shade or color we might typically perceive. "I build and build upon the surface various striations in layers," said Ojih Odutola. "Some may describe them as anatomical, sinewy or aesthetically reminiscent of hair. This style is none of those things: it's about texture, tactility and mezzanines."

What does that say about identity, but more interestingly, what does that say about what we are accustomed to seeing when we see an image of a face or bodies?

- Toyin Ojih Odutola

By distorting the representation of a quality that silently governs so much of America's social prejudices and injustices -- skin color -- her work pushes us to look at everything else about the subject.

"I became infatuated with this idea of filtering and transforming. Taking something concrete and very direct ... and messing it up," she explained. "It wasn't about masking the source, but about stretching how an image can be transformed, what it can become, how it can be misleading and also revealing."

Ojih Odutola found she wanted to question, more and more, how her work deconstructed our default views of identity, she said. She'd ask herself as she worked, "What does that say about identity, but more interestingly, what does that say about what we are accustomed to seeing when we see an image of a face or bodies?"

Unlike classical portraits, Ojih Odutola's may not even be recognizable to the subjects. "I never looked at portraits as indicative of the sitters in any way," she explained. "I looked at portraits as a means for the artist to create his or her own space to invent." As a Nigerian-American immigrant, finding a space of her own has been particularly vital. "It helps me deal with that lost, powerless feeling of wandering around as a Nigerian-American kid not feeling like the ground I was stepping on could truly be mine ... I wanted to create my own terrain."

In the landscapes she's created of her subjects' very skin, Ojih Odutola has succeeded at creating her own terrain; but more than that, she's found a way to help us all, slowly and deliberately, re-envision how we can see each other's faces and bodies, without easy categorizations.

Toyin Ojih Odutola's "Of Context and Without" will be on display from Dec. 11, 2015 through Jan. 30, 2016 at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City. Check out more from the show below, and find more from the artist [at her website](#).



TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA

VISUAL ARTIST

The contemporary artist Toyin Ojih Odutola uses pen and ink to etch portraits onto paper that explore how the socio-political concept of skin has led to constructions of race and power. Her show, "Of Context and Without" opening this month at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, features these works as well as chalk drawings that represent a new way of exploring flesh. "I asked myself, 'What is one group of people who would love to be black?'" Odutola says pointing to *The Treatment* series, included in the show, of more than a dozen portraits of famous white men. One such subject, Ronald Reagan, sketched in white chalk on white paper, is hard to see and that is in part Odutola's point.

The mark-making technique of the Nigerian-born artist seems to expose the sinews of individuals as a way to challenge aesthetic and social implications of skin color. "The style itself is this strange language," she says. "I took it to this organic level and it just started to get more and more perverse," adds Odutola, who has recently exhibited her work at Goodman Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa and was a part of "Fore" at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 2012. "I was always interested in how layered I can make the mark... I am just thinking about the skin as a landscape."

— Antwaun Sargent



The New York Times **Style** Magazine

The Male Muse, Depicted by Women

By LEANNE SHAPTON SEPT. 9, 2015

In a portfolio curated by Leanne Shapton, eight women capture the mysterious, beloved, scrutinized subject still rare in the art world: men.



"Aldo, in parallel," part of a comic-book project by the artist made with pen ink, marker and charcoal on paper, 2015. Credit Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Toyin Ojih Odutola

'I'm attracted to androgyny, so I don't see male and female qualities as distinctive or different. I like to mix them together. I like to mess them up. I came across a quote recently, from Gabriel Orozco, proclaiming: "I don't use the word beauty anymore... The word beautiful is not an absolute, it's a moment." So true!'

THE NEW YORKER

“Empire”: TV’s Contemporary-Art Gallery

BY!ANTWAUN!SARGENT!



Toyin Ojih Odutola’s “Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer” appears in an episode of “Empire.”

In 2014, weeks before the pilot was shot for “Empire,” the soapy Fox musical drama, Lee Daniels, the show’s creator, reached out to the artist Kehinde Wiley to ask for permission to include his work in the new project. “He didn’t know if it was going to be the biggest car wreck or the biggest success,” Wiley said. “And I said, ‘Sure.’” In the Season One finale, the men of the Lyon family sat at a dining-room table underneath Wiley’s “[Prince Albert, Prince Consort of Queen Victoria](#).” It’s a portrait of a bare-chested and tattooed Jamaican man, one hand on his hip and posturing proudly. Lucious Lyon (Terrence Howard) who had just found out he was not sick with Lou Gehrig’s disease, stood in a gray suit at the head of the table, stately like the figure in the ornate painting behind him, to tell his sons the news. The moment was a dramatic plot twist, and the painting stole the scene. “Just like the script, the music, the set design, and the clothes, the artwork on Empire is its own character and tells a part of the Lyon-family story,” Daniels told me.

“Empire,” the most-watched prime-time show on Fox, is now in its second season. The show’s four-stage Chicago set doesn’t feel like a contemporary art gallery; it’s much less pristine, and the artwork hangs inconspicuously on the walls amid the on-set chaos. But the art world’s influence is clear. The paintings on display, mostly portraits, represent a generation of celebrated works by black artists, which have toured America’s museums during the past two decades. The works sit underneath special lighting, designed to show off their powerful imagery when the cameras are rolling. The show’s set decorator, Caroline Perzan, works with Daniels, art advisers, museum curators, and commercial galleries to pick every piece of the art on the show. In addition to Wiley, the show has featured works by Mickalene Thomas, Barkley L. Hendricks, Kerry James Marshall, and lesser-known artists such as Lobyn Hamilton. “I’ve been doing this twenty-six years, and I was

really excited because rarely do I get a director who includes the art within the shot,” Perzan said. “The art has become one of the main focal points of the set design.”

The originals of most of the works hang in museums and private collections, so Perzan and her team print and stretch replications onto canvas to be hung in the homes and offices of the Lyon family. “We choose pieces that match the taste of the Lyons and the world they live in—sometimes it’s over the top, but most times it’s classy and my definition of ghetto fabulous,” Daniels told me. His view seems to reflect a yearning to open the artworks up to an entirely new language for interpretation. For example, Wiley’s 2007 oil-on-canvas painting “Officer of the Hussars,” which hangs in the Detroit Institute of Arts, shows a young male straddling a horse, with a sword in hand. The painting plays with the aesthetics of race, power, and masculinity, as does much of Wiley’s work. Hakeem Lyon (Bryshere Y. Gray) is the youngest member of the family, and one plot line follows his attempts to be more than just a rapper; the “Hussars” replica hangs in Hakeem’s living room. The characters have never spoken about their taste in art, but Perzan, standing in Lucious Lyon’s office in front of golden works by Francine Turk, said that the work she sees as “hip-hop art” is meant to “infuse the art with the message”—that the Lyons, whose family business is hip-hop music, live in gilded surroundings that reflect their taste.

Artists who aim to be embraced by the blue-chip art market traditionally have what Wiley described as “a very strong aversion to popular culture.” The artists want their works to be properly contextualized, and museums and galleries take the care to oblige. Now artists are sending Perzan e-mails to see if they can get their works placed on the show. “Empire” gives lesser-known artists a platform to show their work that traditional museums have yet to offer. “Being on ‘Empire’ is an amazing privilege,” the emerging artist Ebony G. Patterson said. Her paintings “Untitled VI” and “Untitled I (Khani+di Krew),” which explore gender performance, hang in Jamal Lyon’s (Jussie Smollett) penthouse apartment. “I was quite excited and tickled by the opportunity, and it certainly allowed for my work to engage with a much larger audience,” Patterson said. “Through yet another layer of popular culture, my work creates even *more* visibility for those who have been deemed invisible.” Indeed, what’s art without an audience?

For artists, the gamble is that their works will get lost in the action of the show or, perhaps worse, be seen as merely decorative. Some artists who grant permission to the show, along with curators and gallerists who represent the artists, are doing what they can to stop that from happening. After Barkley L. Hendricks’s painting “Lawdy Mama” appeared on the show, the Jack Shainman Gallery wrote, “Did you catch the lovely ‘Lawdy Mama,’ on Empire last week?” to its fifteen thousand Instagram followers.

And perhaps visibility is the most that an artist can reasonably ask for. During the second-season premiere, Cookie Lyon (Taraji P. Henson), wearing a blue jacket and gold jewelry, stands in front of Toyin Ojih Odutola’s chalk-drawn self-portrait “Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer.” The work explores the sociopolitical concept of skin color, and was exhibited in 2013 at the Louisville Art Center. It is powerfully layered in a museum context, but hanging behind Cookie in that scene it’s more striking as an accompaniment to her fashion ensemble. “I remember thinking, Do I just want for it to be in the background?” Ojih Odutola told me as she moved about her small studio, overlooking Thirty-ninth Street. “This is not what I am thinking when I am making the work. Then you realize this is a part of a story that is bigger than my work. If someone was going to buy my work this would be happening anyway.” Daniels and Perzan have, in a sense, turned “Empire” into a prime-time gallery space for artists to break out of the canonized art world and display their work in a place where it’s sure to be seen. Isn’t that what art is all about?

Toyin Odutola
by Ashley Stull

On race, representation, and inspiration.



A Verb and a Noun, 2013. Pen ink and marker on paper. Diptych, 9 x 12 inches (each).

Toyin Odutola is a master of treading softly while issuing a powerful statement. Her conceptually direct images carry with them dense political undercurrents, yet never neglect the fundamentals of form and craft. While the formal concerns of mark-making and portraiture are in the foreground of her renderings, the ideological foundation on which Odutola works separates her from other artists. The images she creates speak about blackness—African blackness, American blackness, and the blackness of the 20th century color field—compounding these issues of race and history with those of gender. Having recently relocated her studio, the artist discusses her new locale, the evolution of her practice, and the few things that will never change.

Ashley Stull You've fairly recently moved to New York after significant periods in Nigeria, Alabama and California. Is this home now? How did you make that decision and how has it affected your studio?

Toyin Odutola I never would have imagined I'd end up in New York. The concept seemed beyond me, because when you claim that address there is something very official about it, like "I'm a professional now." The crazy trajectory of homes that led me to New York all informed me in ways that precipitated the jump. I have no idea how long I will stay, but being in the city has changed me immensely. You have access to such a diversity of culture (and so much of it) that it inexorably comes into the work. For instance, I never would have imagined that I would create an eight feet long charcoal and pastel drawing, but that happened this year with *LTS IX* (2014). I've also made a ballpoint and marker pen drawing that's sixty-six inches tall, *Rather than look back, she chose to look at you* (2013). That's what New York is all about: scale. Things get more ambitious, you take more risks, you invest more time—because the city demands that of you.

AS How did you arrive at ballpoint pen? It communicates dark tones beautifully, but what works about it so differently from other materials—like charcoal? I know you also work in charcoal and marker, but pen seems born out of something interesting I hope you can unpack.

TO I came to ballpoint pen with a need to render how skin felt like to me. It's a tool that seems to translate more empathetically what I was trying to portray... skin as a striated terrain, and in a broader sense, the concept of a portrait as a platform for creating a sense of place. The sheen is the key. When I press the pen into the surface of paper, board or wood, a sort of engraving is taking place, akin to the process of printmaking. The magic of viscous fluid is that the darkest areas, the relief-like marks, also become the lightest areas by simply changing one's point of view. Light and shadow play are what make the pen and ink interactive. I have worked with graphite and charcoal and all are successful in their own way, but there is something very singular about the viewing process of pen ink that sets it apart from the others.

It's incredibly inspiring conceptually, and over time the ballpoint pen has been the driving force for a number of explorations.



LTS VIII, 2014. Charcoal and pastel on paper, approx. 50 x 52 inches.

AS Your early experimentation with marker was drawing on t-shirts, right? What's your history with textiles and how does it play into your work now?

TO I've always been interested in surfaces, textures. Having travelled to and resided in such distinctive locales in my life has often made me question and explore ideas about communication and translation. Drawing is a form of language; so is the art of making textiles. In Nigeria, as in many African countries, there's a rich history involving textiles—the wearing of them, the

making of them and so forth. But, that wasn't always what drew me in that direction. My early drawings on t-shirts were a means of making money and playing with (the then very new) drawing style that I am known for today. I honestly didn't think much would come of it, for I mostly sold them to friends. What I ended up learning from the experience of making them was how my hand moved and adjusted to the surface as I was drawing. It's a hugely significant skill whether dealing with paper, mylar, wood, stone, metal, etc. It taught me how to compose a surface on top of a surface.

AS How do you draw the line in communicating the abstract commonalities of blackness from communicating something more personal? You're known for your self-portraits, but I'm really taken by your portrayal of black men and know you often use your brothers as subjects. Does the concept of "kinship" play into what you do?

TO I have an ambivalent relationship with incorporating the "Blackness" of identity politics with personal portrayals of family members. There are times when these two points are very much exclusive and others when it goes without saying that these are inextricably linked. When I set about drawing a portrait of either one of my brothers, I approach the initial stages from a personal and practical perspective. I want to emphasize the importance of this person who means a great deal to me, but I also wish to explore an inquiry that is broader than that personal realm. It's difficult to describe. There's a lot of back and forth in the process of making that deals more so with implication rather than direct correlations. I am always trying to use the portrait as a means of questioning dogmas or things that appear socially impenetrable, standard and solid. To shake up the notion of something is always exciting to me, even if that means that I am proving myself wrong or attacking a principle or belief that I hold dear. It's a weird balance that I teeter on constantly as I work.

AS We visited in San Francisco several years ago while you were in the planning stages of an exhibition. You were grappling with the most appropriate way to show your work in that space, which was tricky as it wasn't the most conventional of exhibition spaces. I'll never forget the moment it came to fruition and you settled on shelves. *Shelves*. Is there an element in your work that raises questions about the objectification of the black body?

TO Yes! I remember that. I was working on the series "Come Closer," which was

comprised entirely of black ballpoint pen ink (and some times black acrylic ink) on black board. The purpose was to try and invert the context of the portraits I was making, which before that point was mainly black pen ink portraits (sometimes with marker) on a white ground. I was adamant about the white ground before, because I felt the matrix of marks that composed the figures was enough information. But, I was also aware that the impact of black figures against a white ground inherently referenced a contested, objectified read. With the black on black portraits of "Come Closer," I was interested in expanding the materiality and the concept of blackness in form, structure and aesthetic and how that can be applied to social constructs of identity. This convoluted idea of "Blackness" (which is suspiciously static) always puzzled me—and continues to do so. I thought of how to undermine it, to question it in a way that was concise yet thorough. I came to the idea of presenting them on shelves since they were portraits but just as importantly, ideas and objects.



Come Closer: Black Surfaces. Black Grounds. III (Adeola. Abuja, Nigeria.),
2012. Black pen ink on black board, 20 x 15 inches.

AS Can you speak about your influences? I know you have a relationship to artists like Hank Willis Thomas and Kerry James Marshall. In what ways do your influences play into your work, and do you imagine any collaborations in the future?

TO Marshall had a huge influence on me when I was first introduced to him. Every time I see his works, I am always inspired to try different things, different forms, and ways of playing with the surface. Another artist's work I've been really influenced by lately is Lynette Yiadom-Boakye; the way she uses muted palettes and strong accent colors always astounds me. I'm constantly looking for inspiration, to try out different techniques. Influences are great motivators, for they allow you to contemplate processes that may seem far removed from your methodology, but challenge your assumptions about what your work can do, what your work can mean. In terms of collaboration, I am more open to that now than I was a few years ago. I've always wanted to create a comic book, and I often look to artists like Robert Pruitt who work masterfully with that medium. I would love to collaborate with him, if possible. But, if I had an all-time dream collaboration it would be with the manga artist, Takehiko Inoue. Chancing upon his work was one of the defining moments for me as a teenager. Reading the "Vagabond" series made me want to be an artist.

Ashley Stull Meyers has curated exhibitions and programming for the Wattis Institute (San Francisco), Eli Ridgway Gallery (San Francisco), The Luggage Store (San Francisco) and the Oakland Museum of California. She has been in academic residency at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art (Omaha, NE) and the Banff Centre (Banff, Alberta). Most recently, Stull Meyers has been an adjunct professor at Wichita State University (Wichita, KS).

Sunday, January 18, 2015

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Odutola's emphasis is on our common humanity

"This show is singular work," said Toyin Odutola, the 30-year-old Nigerian-American artist whose portraits comprise one of the new exhibitions just opened at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. "Up to this point, I've been known for doing a lot of ballpoint-pen drawings. Last year, I decided to transition with my materials and my tools, and I started using charcoal and pastels."

Last spring, CAM's executive director, Lisa Melandri, met Odutola at another exhibition, "and we connected. She asked me if I'd be interested to do a

show, and I told her, 'If I did, it would be very different. I'd want it to be something that is self-contained, that can exist on its own, separate from my other body of work.' It really is a customized show for this space."

Odutola, who came to this country at the age of 5 with her family, lives and works in New York. She just learned that she'll soon be included in another St. Louis show, at the Kemper Art Museum. Her past artwork has been autobiographical, drawing on her own experiences or those of her family, and playing with the assumptions of others about who she is and where she's from. These pieces, however, are fictional.

"I wanted to step away from (autobiography), for people to come in and see the work without knowing anything about me. I felt that would be easier, for both parties, if they didn't know who I was, what my story was, where I came from. Then they would come into the work with a blank slate, and that so rarely happens nowadays in this culture."

"People want some sort of arc. They want to know your stories. Well, here you go: I'll give you a bunch of stories. You can make your connections however which way you want."

She decided to make a series based on stories she'd heard, conversations between strangers on a train, things that were completely invented, "and take something from that — a word, a phrase — and make a drawing out of it."

As the work emerged, "there were a lot of things going on in the world outside my studio," in Nigeria and Ferguson, Staten Island and elsewhere. "That informed a lot of the pieces in the show."

She quoted a fellow artist: "I don't want you to come into the show thinking about me; I want you to leave the show thinking about us." The hope is that people can come in and create their own narratives. If they can come out of it with a collective view that humanity is so affected by one another, that it's a culmination of stories, that would be so much better. The least you can hope is that people enjoy the work."



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

"What She Saw," 2014, by Toyin Odutola. The artist's "Untold Stories" is a series of mixed-media drawings created specifically for the exhibit at the Contemporary Art Museum.

What's next in visual arts: Kemper's 'Piece by Piece' leads the way

BY ALICE THORSON - THE KANSAS CITY STAR

01/02/2015 6:00 AM | Updated: 01/04/2015 3:58 PM



Nigerian-born, New York-based Toyin Odutola's "LTS XI" (2014) is part of the "Piece by Piece" exhibit at the Kemper Museum. BILL AND CHRISTY GAUTREAUX COLLECTION

What may be the most exciting show of 2015 is coming up fast.

"Piece by Piece: Building a Collection," opening Jan. 30 at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, offers a look at the international art holdings of Kansas City collectors Bill and Christy Gautreaux. The couple made Art News magazine's list of top 200 collectors in 2014.

The Gautreauxes have been buying work since 1996 and have stepped up the pace of acquisitions in recent years.

“Our collecting gained a lot of momentum when we began to meet many knowledgeable collectors and started attending art fairs like Miami Basel, where we were exposed to great galleries from around the world,” Bill Gautreaux said in a statement put out by the Kemper. “It has become a journey of learning from great creators (artists) and expanding our own awareness.”

The exhibit, organized by Kemper curator Erin Dziedzic, will feature more than 30 works by 26 artists, a fraction of a collection that Dziedzic says contains hundreds of pieces.

Many visitors will recognize Sanford Biggers, Nick Cave, Jeffrey Gibson and Kara Walker from previous exhibits in Kansas City. The thrill of this show is its inclusion of works by rising international stars who have not been shown here before, including Mariana Palma, who is based in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Nigerian-born Toyin Odutola.

Dziedzic was given a free hand in choosing the works to include, a process that has taken almost two years. Linking her selections is a focus on “process, pattern and material,” while the works range over a variety of topics and themes.

“This exhibition emphasizes an engagement with themes of abstraction, the body and gesture, race and politics, landscape and geography,” she said.

One of the most satisfying aspects of curating the exhibit was collaborating with the Gautreauxes, Dziedzic said.

“There’s a lot of energy exchanged between the collectors, the artists and works in this show,” she added, “and it’s so important and exhilarating to see and present such a rich collection here in Kansas City.”

Human form explored in Mosaic Project at Pennsylvania College of Art & Design

Posted: Sunday, October 12, 2014 6:30 pm | Updated: 9:29 am, Wed Oct 15, 2014.

BY LAURA KNOWLES | Correspondent



VINNY TENNIS - Staff

Artist Toyin Odutola speaks to middle school students at the Pennsylvania College of Art & Design in Lancaster on Saturday, Oct. 4, 2014.



In the Mosaic Project at Pennsylvania College of Art & Design, two artists share their multicultural experiences through drawing and photography.

Toyin Odutola's drawings are a study in abstract portraiture, taking very real images of friends, family and herself into an entirely different realm. And she is very clear that these are drawings, not paintings.

"That's one of my pet peeves," says the 29-year-old artist who now lives in New York City. "I use pen and ink, markers and charcoal. They are drawings."

Still, to most, what could have been simple drawings are most certainly art. With only the simple tools of pen, markers and charcoal, Odutola manages to create vividly colored portraits of people she knows — including herself.

Born in Nigeria, Odutola has lived in the U.S. since she was 5 years old. She studied at Yale University's Norfolk Summer School of Music & Art, then earned her bachelor's degree in studio art at University of Huntsville. Next, she was off to California, where she received her master of fine arts at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. That has given her a broad range of multicultural experiences here in the U.S. — from the East Coast to the deep South to the West Coast.

What she has chosen to focus on is the human form, most importantly, the human face, with deep, dark eyes, finely-chiseled bone structure and a powerful glimpse into the human soul. They are dark faces, like hers. And they are faces accented by an expected rendering of color that comes from the strokes of multihued colors with markers. In "A.O. (Looking Onward)," a man with very dark skin and a goatee looks to the side with his eyes turned upward — and onward. He wears glittering diamond earrings, but what really catches the eye are the swirls and strokes of cool shades of blue and silver.

Odutola's palette turns warm, in "All These Garlands Prove Nothing X." The woman in the portrait — herself? — peers through hertwisted strands of hair, with only her pensive eyes and lush mouth showing through. Her dark skin is richly glinted with shades of gold, brown, bronze and tan.

While the subjects of Odutola's portraits seem very serious — no one is smiling — the titles of her work give a hint of her playfulness in adding magic to her pen-and-ink drawings.

"All These Garlands Prove Nothing" is a series of self-portraits that explore her own identity through hairstyles. In some she wears long, reddish twisted strands, while in others her hair is short, dark and closely cropped. Then she is there as a bleached blonde with very short hair.

"Are they all me? Yes," she says, adding that these are her hairstyles of the past, as she sought out her identity, as so many women do, through her hair. "And I have to laugh at the blonde hair."

In "Are You Sure That's Him? (Yes, I'm Certain)," a triptych study of a man shows three images of the subject looking partly to the side, looking to the side and looking away. The pen-and-ink abstract images are at once intriguing and just a bit fun as the viewer wonders, "Are you sure that's him?"

Odutola is making her mark in the art world. She was featured in Forbes magazine in its 2012 list of 30 notable individuals under 30 in the category Art & Style. As a contemporary artist who focuses on identity and the sociopolitical concept of skin color, Odutola's work has already made its way into major collections at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama and The National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. She is represented by the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City.

"You can look at the human face as it is, or you can look at it in its abstract form," says Odutola, who spent a day at PCA&D discussing her work with art students as part of the Mosaic Project: Toyin Odutola and Lydia Panas in PCA&D's Main Gallery.

Odutola's opening reception was held Oct. 3, while photographer Lydia Panas will be featured at a gallery reception on First Friday, Nov. 7.

Like Odutola, Panas explores the human form. But she does it in stark realism, through her portraits of very real people. In one, three woman stare straight ahead, one with her hand across her blue shirt. In another, an older man in a baseball cap and tan jacket looks at a young man from behind with a hint of judgment in his gaze. Then there are two woman in a cornfield, one standing and the other crouched on the ground. No one smiles, and the subjects look as if they have been caught off-guard. They are portraits that evoke an air of mystery, like storytelling in one single image.

Panas is an award-winning photographer whose work has been exhibited at The National Portrait Gallery in London, The Scottish National Portrait Gallery and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. Her work has been published in the New York Times Magazine, Photo District News and Popular Photography. She received a Whitney Museum Independent Study Fellowship and has taught photography at The Museum of Modern Art.

Her first monograph, "The Mark of Abel," is on display at PCA&D during the Mosaic Project. It received a Best Books nomination from Photo Eye Magazine and was cited as Best Coffee Table Book of 2012 by the Daily Beast.

Mosaic Project: Toyin Odutola and Lydia Panas is on display in PCA&D's Main Gallery, 204 N. Prince St., through Nov. 15. Admission is free. For more information, visit pcad.edu/news, facebook.com/pcad.edu or call 396-7833.

Portraits of the Artist

Toyin Odutola's rich figures BY MICHAEL SLENSKE

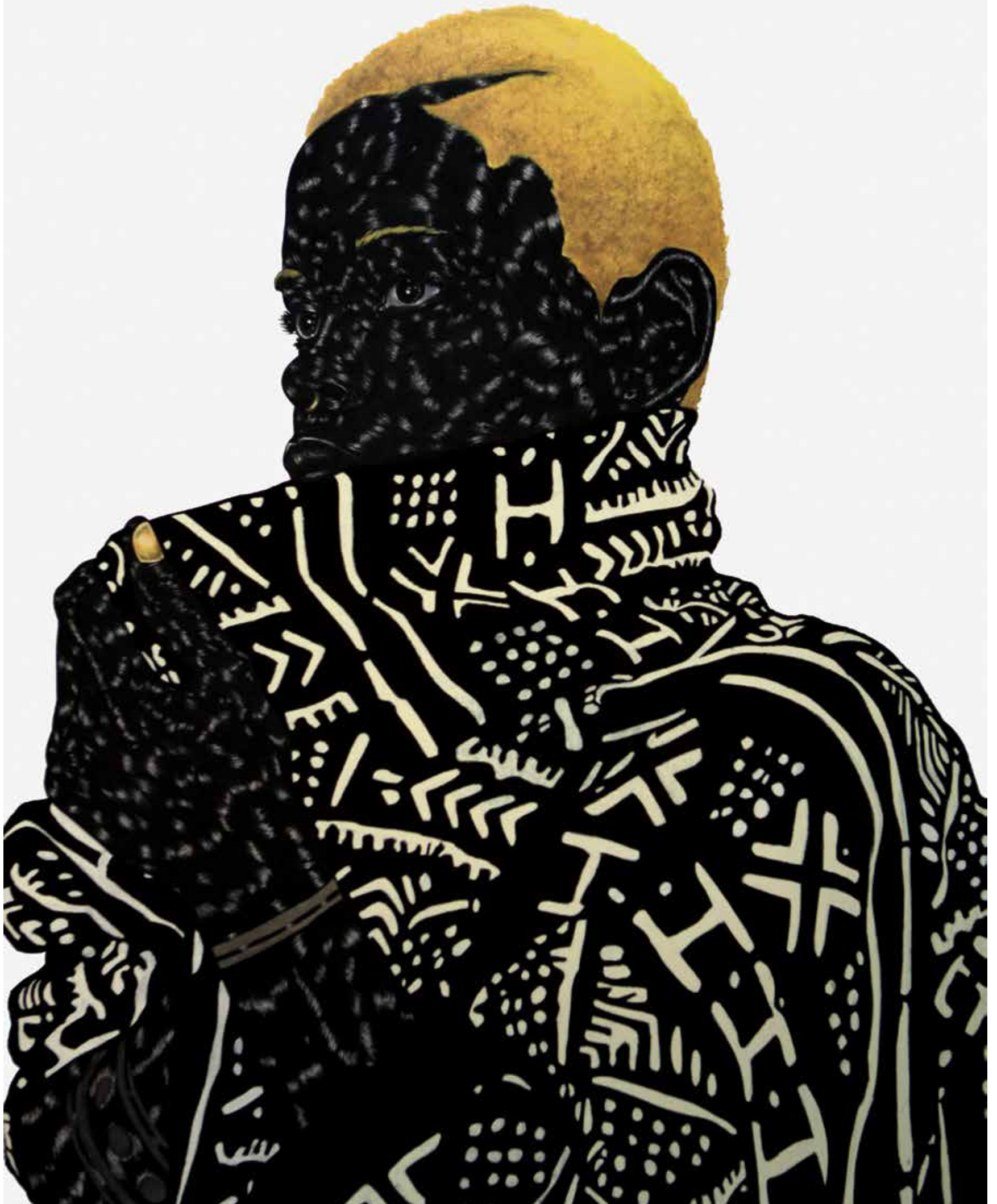




“MY DAD MADE AN EXCLAMATION, and that became my name,” says Toyin Odutola, walking around her studio in Manhattan’s Garment District on a near-freezing night last fall. She’s recalling the panic that set in at a Nigerian hospital in the summer of 1985 when a delivery room doctor explained to her father that they needed to perform an emergency C-section on his wife or else his firstborn would surely suffocate. “My mom was freaking out and, finally, after the doctor was laboring for hours, he goes to my father and says, ‘You have a girl!’ And my dad shouts, ‘*Oluwa Toyin!*’ It means ‘God is worthy of praise,’ but in colloquial Yoruba it means ‘Oh my God.’ So that’s the story of my name. It’s kind of romantic.”

What sorts of stories will we leave behind, 2012. Pen ink and marker on board, 14½ x 23 in.

OPPOSITE:
Toyin Odutola,
2011.



Romantic, yes, and certainly appropriate for an artist whose drawings—and obsessive documentation thereof on her fiercely followed Instagram feed (@obia_thethird)—have attracted thousands of fans who continually drop *OMG!!!* remarks on her pages because they can't believe Odutola's hypnotically detailed portraits of friends and family—often small-scale works on paper built from layers and layers of sinuous black, and sometimes golden, lines (frequently punctuated by illuminated rivulets of color)—are simply the product of Sharpies and Pentels.

"Did you know a ballpoint pen could do that? Did you know that someone could have the patience, discipline, and skill to do that?" asks artist Hank Willis Thomas, who met Odutola after a 2010 lecture he gave at the California College of the Arts, where she was then in her first year as a graduate student. "She asked me to do a studio visit. I'd done 20 in two days, so I was like, 'Heck no!' But I don't like saying no, so I stopped by her studio, wrote my info on the wall, and did my best to make it up to her."

Thomas did a lot more than that. After Odutola sent him an e-mail with images of her work, he forwarded it to a group of collectors (including Karen Jenkins-Johnson and Don and Mera Rubell) as well as his New York gallerist, Jack Shainman, who immediately signed her to his roster. "Her materials never gave us pause; in fact, they were particularly intriguing," says Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels, associate director at the gallery. "We've already placed her in several museum collections with a wait list for new works, and the interest has only grown." Since 2011 Odutola has had two solo exhibitions at Shainman's Chelsea galleries and will open a third on May 1 at his 24th Street location.

"Her figures are simultaneously hyperrealistic and silhouetted into abstraction," says Naima Keith, associate curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem, who included Odutola's work in the acclaimed "Fore" exhibition in 2012. "We were also intrigued by her decision to share so much of her process online. She was letting people in, debunking myths surrounding being an artist and opening herself up to feedback."

As an early adopter of Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram, Odutola has embraced social media in a way that few artists have. At the same time, she's also grown weary of the brazenness some of her followers exhibit on her feeds. "The social media bit is really about documenting process. I like the dialogue if it's constructive, but I'm now at a crossroads. I've accumulated a lot of followers, and it's great, but I'm also at that teetering point where people are feeling themselves a little too much, commenting a little too much," says Odutola, noting some followers who've attempted to weigh in a bit too emphatically on color choices and themes in her works. "I just feel like that's not what I'm doing this for, and if they don't stop I'll just get off it."

Of course, these are problems that would never have occurred to Odutola as a child in Nigeria. Born in the southwestern university town of Ife, to parents from adversarial tribes—her mother, Nelene, is Igbo; her father, Ade, is Yoruba—her family was forced by the threat of violence and inflation to leave when she was just five years old. Back then, Ade was just starting out in chemistry; somehow, he scraped enough money together (on a teaching assistant's modest salary) to move his young family to the States, settling in Berkeley to work and study at the University of California. When Odutola was 10, a tenure-track position took the family to Huntsville, Alabama. "It was a total culture shock," says the artist. "That's where my art education really started, because I went from being just this Nigerian kid in Berkeley to being a black kid in Alabama. You start to realize, 'Oh, I'm flattened. I'm not a whole person anymore.' My identity is not



based on performance, it's based on something that's pre-determined by someone else, and I don't even understand what that is because I'm an African who came to America. Suddenly I'm African-American and black when I didn't even know what the hell that meant."

Over the ensuing years, Odutola would ask herself many questions—*Why is this person called white? Why is this person black?*—while doodling in sketchbooks. Her understanding of art grew at a hobbyist's pace until she came across Lucian Freud's *Reflection (Self-Portrait)*, 1985, as an undergraduate at the University of Alabama. "That man changed my life," she says. "The way he's looking out just past the viewer's perspective, the landscape of the face just hit me like a stack of bricks. You didn't see that and see oil paint. I saw that and said, 'I'm going to use whatever medium I'm using and take it beyond. I want you to question what I'm doing.' I still look at that piece and am like, What the fuck are you made of, what the fuck did you do? How did he take this boring face and make it the most interesting thing you've ever seen? You start to think about what his face has gone through, what he's gone through. That minute, I was like, 'Dude, I'm an artist.'"

That revelation—coupled with encouragement from her Alabama professors—instilled Odutola with the confidence to follow the idiosyncratic style she was creating in her

Rather Than Look Back, 2011–13. Pen ink and marker on paper, 65 x 36 in.

OPPOSITE: *Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer*, 2013. Charcoal, pastel, and graphite on paper, 40 x 30 in.



self-taught sideline of drawing rather than suggestions from others to adopt the more classically informed medium of painting. She began with very contained black-and-white portraits of her friends, parents, and brothers, Adeola (“Addy”) and Dotun—her two most prominently featured subjects—but is now venturing into gold-leaf lithography (through a collaboration with New Mexico’s Tamarind Institute), video, and sculpture. “I don’t want to make it so much about my family as about the idea of narrating seduction in different forms,” she says. Up until Odutola’s decision last year to add to her compositions natural backgrounds and boldly patterned clothes—which she has integrated to stunning effect in a new series of charcoal pieces, such as *Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer*, 2013, for her upcoming solo show—she always drew her subjects naked. More recently, she has augmented their sensuous forms with fluorescent blues, greens, oranges, pinks, and yellows. And she always placed them against the stark backdrop of unmarked white paper, never in situ.

“When I was in school, I conceptually didn’t want black people to have context, to take it out of all that history. I wanted nothing to indicate where they are or what time it is, to place them anywhere,” she says. “I had to completely remove them from context because I felt like there’s enough information on their skin anyway.” However, isolating African or African-American figures against white backdrops brought out immediate comparisons to Kara Walker. Odutola is also frequently compared with Mickalene Thomas and Wangechi Mutu, whose extravagantly detailed depictions of strong black women have driven the art world’s dialogue on identity politics, colonialism, and race over the

“It was a total culture shock. I went from being this Nigerian kid in Berkeley to being a black kid in Alabama. I realized, ‘Oh, I’m flattened. I’m not a whole person anymore.’”

past few years. While she respects and admires the works of all three of these female powerhouses, Odutola thinks such “quick” comparisons miss the point of her work.

“It’s very difficult as a black artist to say, ‘No, it’s not about race.’ But it isn’t,” she explains. “I don’t think about race before I start drawing. I think about how to make that mark to fit whatever purpose I need it to fulfill.” She’d rather her work be read as a labyrinthine narrative, arguing, “I definitely read these portraits like you’d read a letter—not a poem, not a book—like a letter to this imaginative figure I’m creating.” Those letters all begin with iPhone or point-and-shoot source images, like one of her wearing an electric-blue sweater, *When the Witnesses Are Gone*, 2013, or another of her brother Addy looking calm amid the chaos at the Abuja airport on Christmas Eve a few years back, *Regarding... (Adeola in Abuja)*, 2011). One deviation from that process is a piece featuring Redd Foxx as a silver-haired Platonic philosopher (*The Philosopher*, 2013–14).

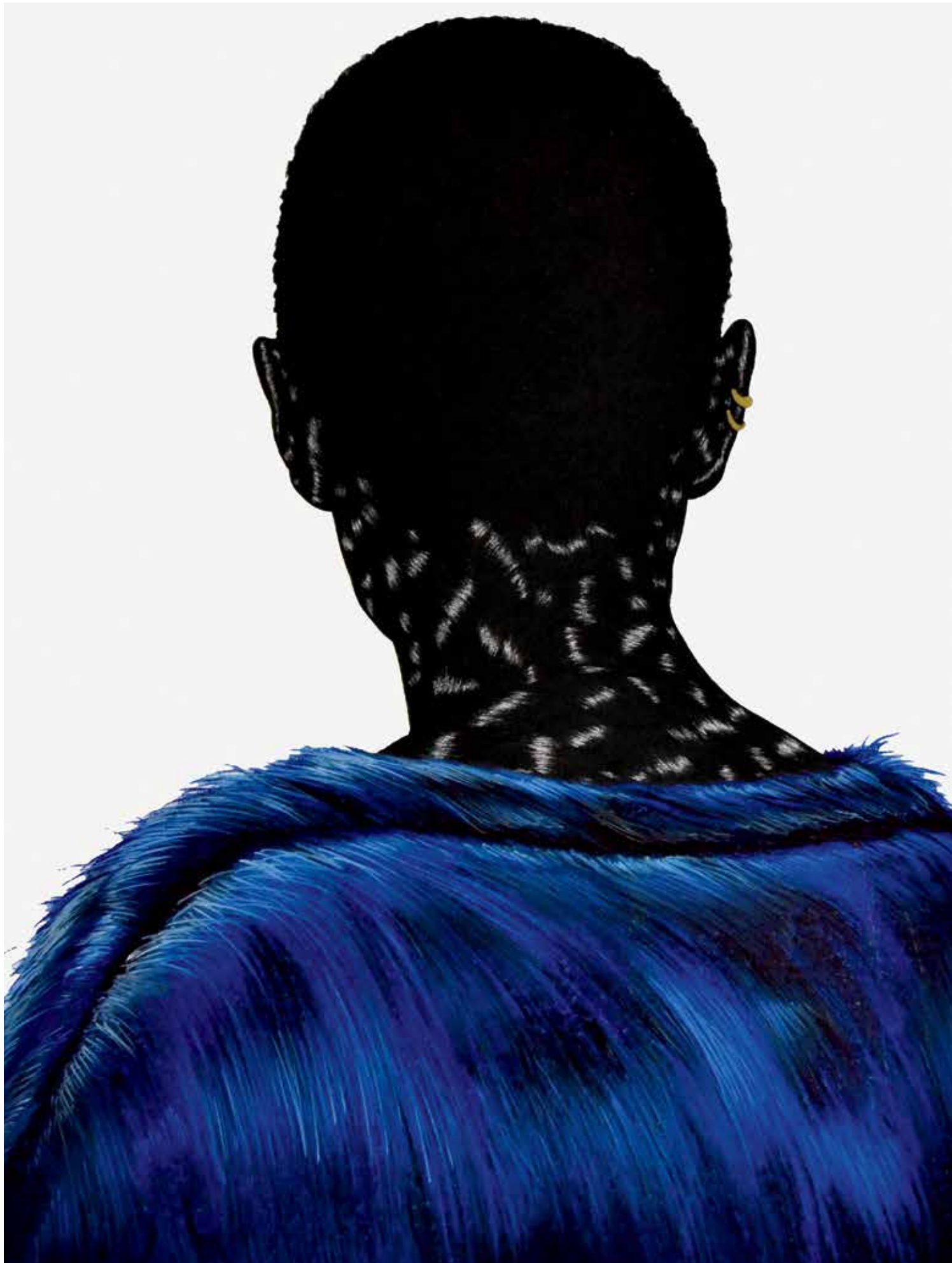
While these new charcoal pieces feature golden-haired subjects as a nod to fetishized medieval and Renaissance depictions of Africans, she says that the drawings are influenced by her love of Manga comics like *Sailor Moon*, *Gantz*, and *Old Boy*. In fact, one of her favorite studio diversions is a trip to Midtown Comics, where she’s a regular. In a perfect world, she would someday create her own animated series. For now, however, she’s content with her recent evolution to larger-scale works and putting down the pens for sticks of pastel and charcoal.

“You can see the new distinctions of how I’m working now—the lines are thicker. The color choices. It’s subtle. I’ve come a long way, baby,” she says, noting that her return to charcoal and pastel has been challenging. “I’m rediscovering the material as I’m working, and each piece is new because I’ve never drawn that way with this tool. It’s all a learning experience; it’s messy. I’m drawing right on this janky wall. But I like that for some reason. It’s masochistic in a way.”

She says she approaches each piece with the clinical eye of Chuck Close and the raw painterly energy of Freud to produce “perverse” abnormalities and “awkward moments” on the page. “When I get into it, I go real Lucian; I get dirty,” she says. “I used to be afraid of that in grad school. Now I’m ready to go HAM about it.”

Aside from “Honey, let me tell you something...,” “going HAM” (hard as a motherfucker) is perhaps Odutola’s favorite phrase. Though it’s a reference to Jay-Z and Kanye West’s song “H-A-M,” it’s a concept that draws her to the combative, adversarial side of life: one in which she gets new tattoos with every transitional life moment (“I’m probably going to be completely covered when I’m 80”), obsessively watches BBC documentaries on the royal family despite their perversions (“They’re crazy people”), or develops a forthcoming series on transsexuals based on the post-op bodies of friends. “That’s the most intense thing—you really take control and remake your form,” she says. “But that’s what art is.”

You see, in Odutola’s world, there is no reward without a little risk...no pleasure without a little pain. **MP**



When the Witnesses Are Gone, 2013.
Charcoal, pastel, marker, and graphite on paper, 40 x 30 in.

OPPOSITE:
The Philosopher, 2013–14.
Pen ink and marker on board, 30 x 20 in.

ARTnews

JANUARY 2014

Ballpoint Magic

Anthony Caro:
The Defiant One

Ceramic Art
Gets Serious

Nazi Art Dealers:
The Inside Story



Ballpoint Is on a Roll

Accessible and affordable, the ballpoint pen has become the medium of choice for artists to make obsessive abstractions, extreme drawings, and playful riffs on venerated ink traditions

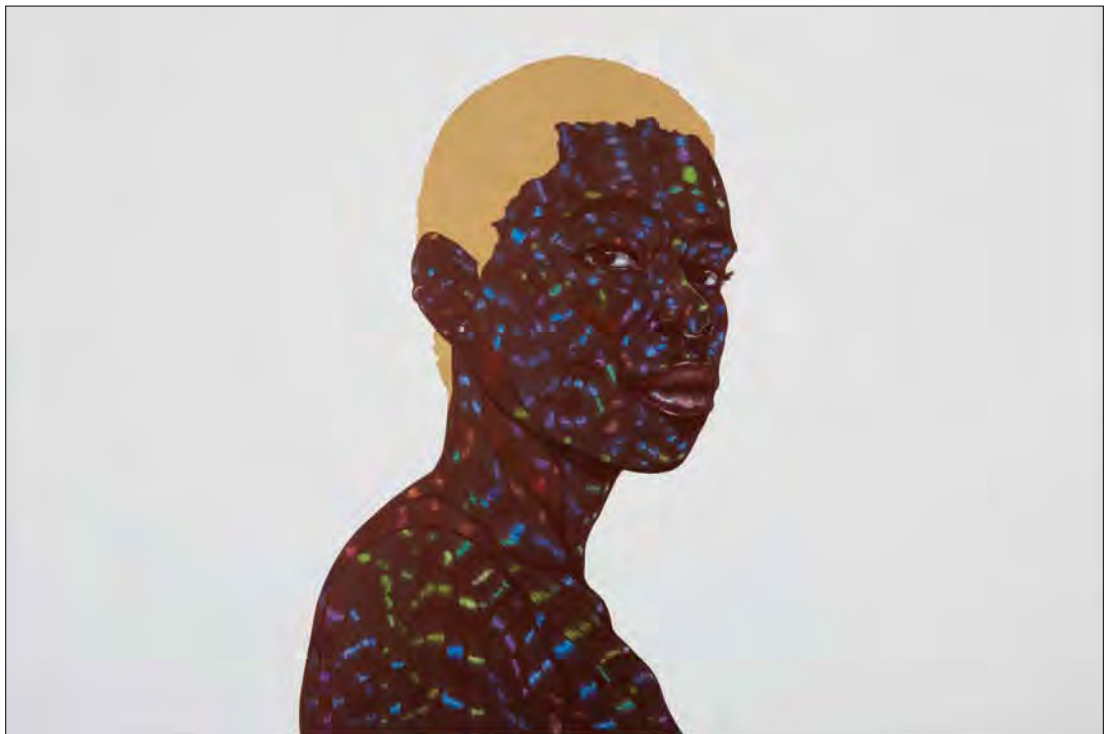
BY TRENT MORSE

Last August, Toyin Odutola brought a stack of ballpoint pens and markers into the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, sat down, and drew a picture. A large screen projected her progress as she filled the paper with thousands of marks. Museumgoers circled around her and asked her questions. “One lady was like, ‘Is that pen? I don’t believe it!’” Odutola recalls. “I was drawing, and she took the pen out of my hand and looked at it.”

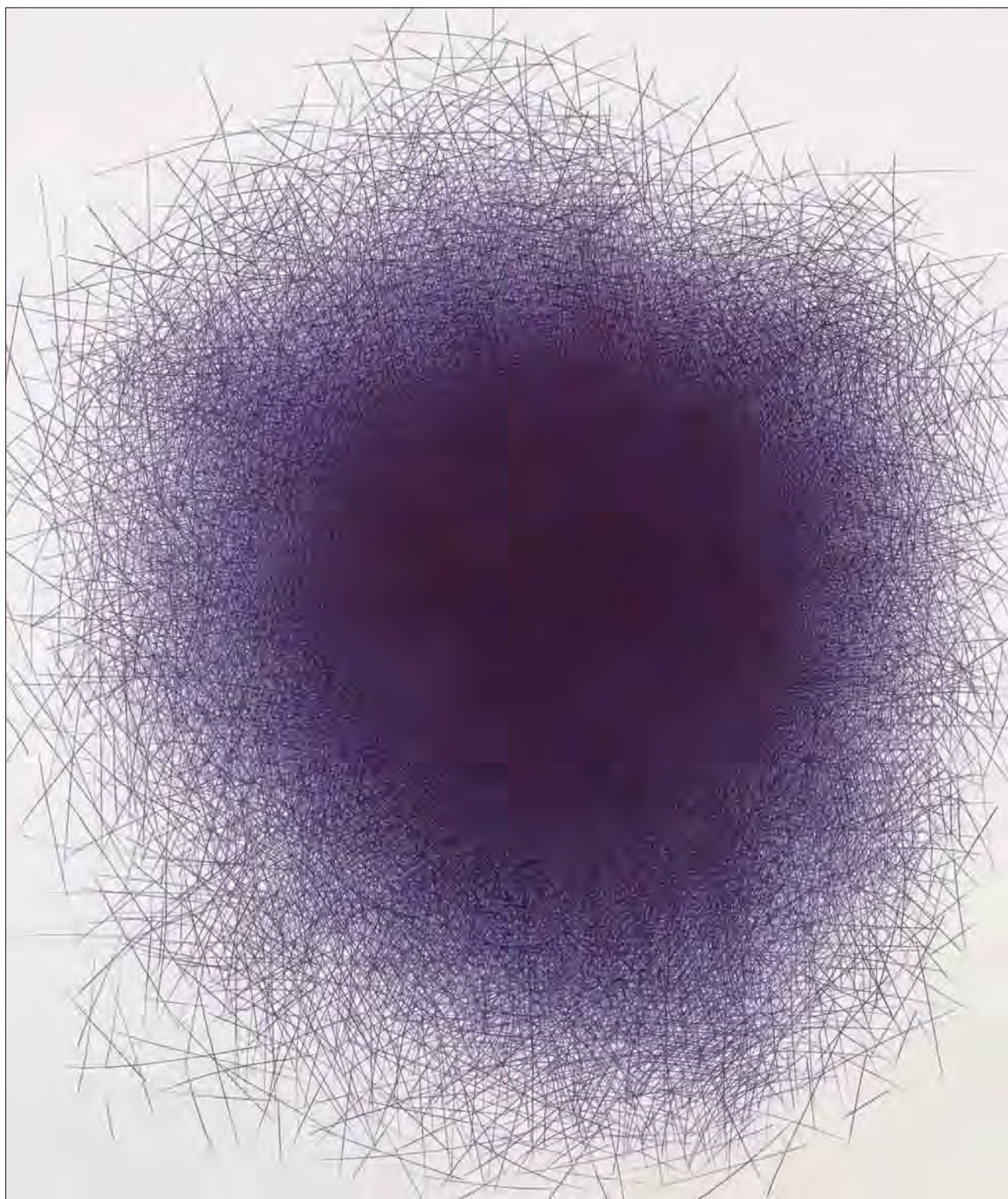
To shut out these kinds of distractions and focus on the task at hand, Odutola put on headphones and listened to dance music. Four hours after she started drawing, she was done, having produced a densely limned portrait of an Asian woman with golden hair and eyebrows, her skin composed of Odutola’s signature sinewy ballpoint lines, with blue, green, and flesh tones rising from underneath. “It was shocking that I finished, because I’d never really performed drawing,” says Odutola, who was born in Nigeria and grew up in the Bay Area and Alabama. “It’s normally a very solitary act within my studio.”

Trent Morse is senior editor of ARTnews.

**Toyin Odutola's
self-portrait
*Text Turned
Flesh*, 2013,
ballpoint pen
and marker
on paper.**



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK



**Il Lee's *BL-1201*, 2012,
ballpoint pen on paper.**

Fortunately for Odutola, she has been in plenty of other exhibitions over the last year that haven't required her to perform for a crowd. She had a solo show at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, where she's now based, and her ballpoint drawings have made appearances at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Menil Collection in Houston, and the Chinese Cultural Center of San Francisco and are now at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts in Brooklyn (through January 19).

She was also included in "Ballpoint Pen Drawing Since 1950" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, which placed the 28-year-old Odutola at the tail end of a succession of creators who have embraced the lowly ballpoint pen as a serious tool for making art. The others in the show were Alberto Giacometti, Alighiero Boetti, Il Lee, Jan Fabre, Martin Kippenberger, Bill Adams, Joanne Greenbaum, Russell Crotty, Rita Ackermann, and Dawn Clements. But curator Richard Klein traces the genesis of ballpoint art back to Argentina in the 1940s.

The ballpoint pen was first patented in 1888 as a device for jotting on leather. It wasn't developed as a writing tool until 50 years later, when the Hungarian journalist László Bíró had the idea of putting fast-drying newspaper ink into a pen with a tiny ball at the tip that would allow the ink to flow evenly. Then came World War II, and Bíró escaped to Argentina in 1941, taking his invention with him. Manufacture of

the pens began in Buenos Aires soon afterward.

Lucio Fontana also moved to Argentina in the early '40s. He was born in that country in 1899 but spent a large part of his life in Italy, where he had come under the influence of the Futurists and shared their obsession with cutting-edge technology. "Fontana was the first artist to use ballpoint pen, in 1946," Klein says. "The pen was heavily promoted in Argentina, and I'm sure it's no coincidence that he was using ballpoint pen in the same place where Bíró had invented it." Those early ballpoint sketches reflect Fontana's interest in merging art, science, and technology through his Spatialist movement. In one drawing, Fontana doodled a spiraling funnel filled with swirling orbs, as if he were testing the continuous-flow quality of the new pen.

Soon, the ballpoint spread to Europe and the United States, thanks in large part to the clear-plastic Bic Cristal. It was cheap, portable, and reliable, and it didn't smudge or blot as much as fountain pens did. It also produced uniform lines, making it a quintessentially modernist tool. Throughout the '50s and '60s, Giacometti, Jean Dubuffet, Agnes Martin, Andy Warhol, Nam June Paik, Yayoi Kusama, John Cage, Sigmar Polke, Louise Bourgeois, and many other artists sketched with ballpoint pen. Cy Twombly incorporated it into his doodle-and-text works, and "the Fluxus artists used all sorts of office materials, including ballpoint pens, tape, stamps, and typewriters," says Scott Gerson, associate conservator at New York's Museum of Modern Art.



A detail of Liu Wei's accordion album *Untitled No. 6 "Flower,"* 2003, pencil, acrylic, ink, ballpoint pen, and watercolor on paper.

PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK

Perhaps the first person to use the ballpoint as the primary medium in a major work of art was Alighiero Boetti. Starting in the early '70s, the Italian artist employed dozens of helpers to fill sheets of paper with solid fields of black, blue, or red ink. His 1973 piece in the Aldrich show consisted of eleven such panels, all with "ONONIMO"—a wordplay on the Italian terms for anonymous, homonymous, and eponymous—etched from white negative space at the top. "The blue in this work is really extraordinary," says Klein. "The pieces are really well preserved. Other Boettis were not—they are faded."

Which brings up the biggest problem with ballpoint ink: preservation. "Early ballpoint-pen ink, especially the blue, would fade if you exposed it to the light. It's not permanent," Klein says. "That's because most of the inks are dye-based colorants, which are susceptible to color-shift or fading," says Gerson. Today, many professional artists buy pens containing archival inks, but "really, the only reliable thing is to keep it out of the light," Gerson adds.

In the decades since Boetti's collaborations, the ballpoint has become increasingly absorbed into the art world, and like all artists today, ballpointists aren't hindered by style or scale. Jan Fabre spent a decade working with the pens, which culminated in his covering an entire Belgian castle in blue ballpoint marks in 1990. Russell Crotty makes large grids of small scenes of the shifting California landscape, the ocean, and astronomical phenomena, and he also draws these things onto globes. In Boston, Joo Lee Kang portrays animals and plants in the style of Victorian naturalists and sometimes converts her drawings into wallpaper or crumpled-paper sculptures. Renato Orara, who recently showed at Josée Bienvenu Gallery in New York, smoothly renders any object that catches his eye: a wire brush, a wristwatch, a broken umbrella, a leather jacket. "I don't try to make things look real," he says. "An art writer once pointed out that I use realism, but only as a strategy for smuggling something else."

In Asia, some artists use ballpoint to riff on venerated ink traditions. One such piece appears in the show "Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (through April 6). That work is Liu Wei's 24-leaf accordion album *Untitled No. 6 "Flower"* (2003), which contains painted and drawn Chinese landscapes and giant peonies next to "naked figures with exaggerated genitalia," says Maxwell K. Hearn, the Met's chief curator of Asian art. These mixed-media scenes are embellished with "scratchy lines that are ballpoint pen," Hearn adds. "They're scribbles. You could miss them."

You couldn't miss the scribbles in the work of Il Lee, who, since 1981, has been filling canvas and paper with abstract, woolly lines that progress from wispy to murky. The Korean-born, New York-based Lee, who's represented by Art Projects International in New York, is a ballpoint purist, meaning he goes through a lot of ink. "I usually use anywhere from 100 to 120 or more ballpoint pens on large canvas works," he says. For his 2007 solo show at the Queens Museum of Art, he emptied 600 blue ballpoint pens to make a 50-foot-long drawing that snaked along the wall.



Joanne Greenbaum, *Artist Book*, 2007, ballpoint pen on paper.



Joo Lee Kang, *Family Portrait #6*, 2013, ballpoint pen on paper.

Like Lee, Italian artist Angiola Gatti, who had her U.S. debut at New York's Ryan Lee gallery last fall, scrawls with ballpoint to form abstract masses and voids. Gatti says she works on a "corporeal, one-to-one" scale, drawing on vertical canvases that are roughly the size of her body. She likes how intimately close to the artwork ballpoint brings her, and sometimes she presses the pen so hard that the "canvas is nearly carved."

Marlene McCarty, who shows at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York, also draws on large surfaces, but her work is highly figurative and psychologically charged, populated by sexualized adolescent girls and great apes. To her, the blue ballpoint pen reflects what high-school girls use for homework and for "doodling on their notebooks," and it's the preferred tool for "primate fieldwork." However, McCarty is not as romantic as Gatti when it comes to the physicality of ballpoint. "For the scale of my drawings, it's a horrible, tedious, painful medium," she says. "Ballpoint is unforgiving. It can't be corrected. I draw on the wall. Unless the pen is held at just the right angle, it stops working. The pressure required to keep the ink flowing causes shoulder injuries."

"Ballpoint-pen drawing can be extremely labor-intensive and time-consuming because the mark it makes is linear," says Dawn Clements, who shows at Pierogi in Brooklyn. "I make tonal drawings, so my drawings often take a very long time." Clements describes her patched-together panoramas of the inside of her home and movie sets as life-size "sketchbooks." As with McCarty, the medium mirrors the content in Clements's works, which can run more than 40 feet long. Ballpoint is, she says, "a common domestic implement used to express my experience of

domestic life and melodramatic movies that depicted domestic familial situations."

The domesticity of the pen helps explain its mass appeal as an art material. "All of us touch a ballpoint pen practically every day," Klein says. There are now photorealist draftsmen from outside the art world whose pictures have gone viral on the Internet, such as Samuel Silva, a Portuguese lawyer living in London. Though, inexplicably, the curator adds, the Aldrich exhibition might be the first museum roundup of ballpoint art, and that show featured only eleven artists in a 1,400-square-foot gallery.

As for which brand of pen is best, it depends on who you ask. "Joanne Greenbaum uses Schmidts that are made in Germany," Klein says. Crotty likes the Swedish Ballograf. Odutola and Clements both use Paper Mates. Lee says he formerly favored Paper Mate but noticed changes in the "chemistry of the ink." Lately, he's been on a Bic kick.

Gatti goes for Bic, Staedtler, and Pilot, while Orara imports his Pilots from Japan. McCarty prefers the blue Montblanc that is designed for "signing important documents." However, she adds, "they are too heavy to hold upright against the wall for hours at a time, so I take a Montblanc ballpoint refill, force it into a cheap lightweight plastic Bic pen handle, tape the whole thing together, and use that."

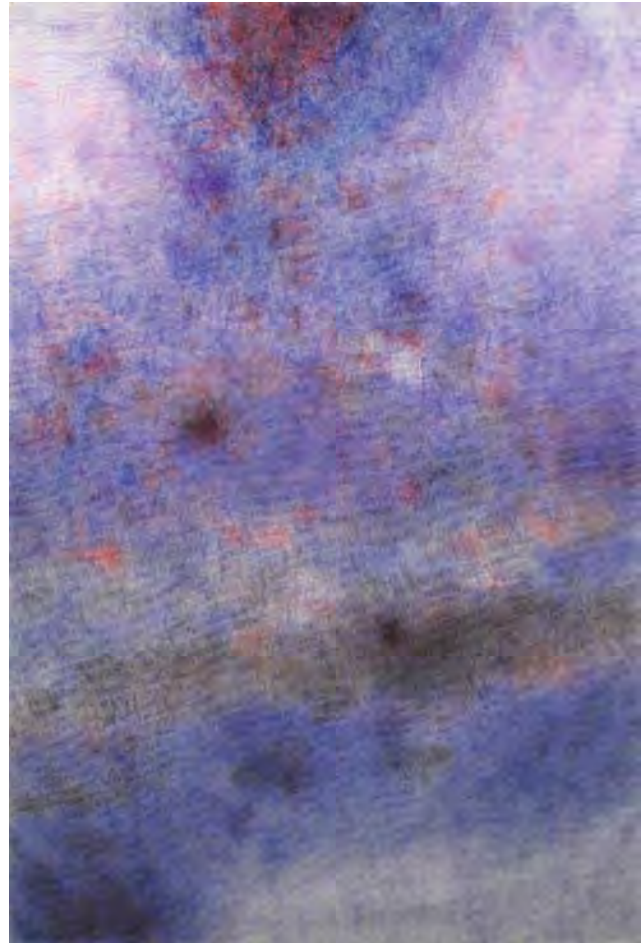
Peter Saul, who has been drawing and painting his funky, freaky, cartoony characters for over half a century and now shows his work at Mary Boone Gallery in New York, says, "I only use black, and I never pay attention to the brand." And Yoshitomo Nara claims that when it comes to drawing his Kute Kulture figures, "I'm fine with the kind of pen you find on your hotel desk." ■



A detail of Dawn Clements's 20-foot-long ballpoint drawing *Mrs. Jessica Drummond's (My Reputation, 1946)*, 2010.



Russell Crotty, *Watch the Dolphins Play*, 2007, ballpoint pen and watercolor on paper on a fiberglass sphere.



Angiola Gatti, *Untitled (Senza titolo)*, 2012, ballpoint pen on canvas.



Renato Orara, *Untitled 2011-05*, 2011, ballpoint pen on paper.



Marlene McCarty, *GROUP 3 (Tanjung Putting, Borneo. 1971)*, 2007, ballpoint pen and graphite on paper.



THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART PLUS
EXTENDING THE COVERAGE OF THE PRINT JOURNAL

MY COUNTRY HAS NO NAME

fayemi shakur

It is the story that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is the escort, without it we are blind. – Chinua Achebe.



Toyin Odutola, *All These Garlands Prove Nothing VI*, 2012, pen ink and marker on paper, 14x17 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

After 9/11, Nigerian-born artist Toyin Odutola noticed a shift starting in American society. Nationhood and patriotism suddenly took precedence over upholding the principles of a multi-cultural society. Odutola's perception was that the American spirit, once symbolized as a melting pot, changed; in her eyes it became a lie. "I remember as a teenager feeling pressured to be a certain way, to be very American and I knew that didn't make sense. I was like a lot of people — a combination of two very divergent cultures," Odutola recalls.

Odutola was born in Ife, a town in southwestern Nigeria with a history of naturalistic bronze, stone and terracotta sculpture production dating back to antiquity. Her name, Oluwatoyin (shortened to Toyin) means praise God or God is worthy of praise in Yoruba. "My Dad says that I severed God and I'm just 'praise.' It has been a long standing family joke since I was a little kid," says the 28-year-old artist.

Her family moved to Huntsville, Alabama when she was nine years old. Although Huntsville is predominantly conservative, her family found space in multiple communities where they could thrive. Huntsville's sizable Nigerian population provided a sense of community. There was also church and for Toyin, arts clubs and an eclectic group of friends. "Huntsville is very much an engineering and military town, not a town you come to for the arts, but being in Huntsville helped me. Being in a place where everyone was so logical and practical, something snapped. I realized I did not want to be that type of person and gravitated towards the arts and out-of-the-box ideas."

While she was in middle school, Toyin, for the first time realized that she was black and "foreign" because she was told so to her face. "Before that, being black and African was just part of the cornucopia of what made me and I was treated based on my performance. But when I moved to Alabama, I realized my performance no longer mattered because my skin suddenly spoke for me. I realized it would impact how people treated and responded to me and that continued into my adulthood."

Navigating the tween and teen realms is already challenging under the best circumstances but for Odutola, it was also an experience of being "flattened" into a preconceived notion of who she was presumed to be. "Nothing affects a person more than living in a space where you're a minority," she says.

"You want to talk about identity politics, go to a middle school lunchroom. Your identity is your only capital. I struggled with the idea of what I had to assimilate to, which group to join in, and what would make it acceptable for me to move through this new culture. These ideas of otherness and segmenting people seemed very important at that age. It starts really young with children. Then you come into some consciousness and realize 'I'm more than this flattened portrayal of myself.'"

As an dark-skinned African woman, Odutola also has experienced intra-racial bias. Growing up, she was annoyed by black people's color hang-ups and their "Yo Mama so dark jokes." It seemed to her to be self-destructive. "It was like, you're making fun of me but you're really making fun of yourself. I didn't internalize it, I always questioned it."

Odutola studied at the University of Alabama, Huntsville (BA), and the California College of the Arts, San Francisco (MFA). Trying to acclimate herself to the majority and explain her life and culture to others was initially frustrating. She didn't start feeling the power of identity struggles until college where she began learning about African American woman artists.

One of her instructors at the University of Alabama in Huntsville nominated and encouraged Odutola to enter Yale University's Norfolk Summer School of Music & Art program. She was the only person from her school to get into the program. While at the California College of the Arts, Odutola met visiting artist Hank Willis Thomas who continues to be a strong and supportive mentor. Odutola cornered him after a lecture and invited him to a studio to review her work. At first he declined but he did come. Impressed by her work, he sent some images of it to Jack Shainman which led to her being represented by the gallery. She had her first show there in 2011 – *Toyin Odutola: (MAPS)*.

My Country Has No Name, an exhibition of Odutola's latest work, was on view at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, from May 16 until June 29, 2013. Her drawings touch upon themes of triple (African, African American and general) consciousness and blurring identities. In exploring the skin of her subjects as a geographical terrain, she traces connotations of blackness. Like the ancient Ife sculptors, Odutola too creates intricate line work and focuses on the face, a traditional style she likes but wasn't aware of until she began studying at the university level.

Odutola found that visitors to the *My Country Has No Name* show could relate to the expression of her personal experience with their own feelings of dislocation. "This idea, which people say they can relate to in the show, of floating, or feeling like you're not really rooted anywhere. It's something I suspect a lot



Figure Toyin Odutola, *All These Garlands Prove Nothing IV*, 2012, pen ink and marker on paper, 14x17 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

of people feel, always trying to mark the ground with your presence to show that you have been somewhere. It's a futile act. You have this feeling that nothing is quite permanent." Odutola hit on an existential fact that gave rise to whole schools of philosophy and psychology: how to square the seeming solidness of this self in this moment and place with the recognition that the only constant is change and that we all will die.

"My family has been here for a long time," Odutola reflects. "I've spent more time in America than anywhere else. So in that regard, I shouldn't feel like I'm in a purgatorial state. Ever since I was a kid, the feeling of being home was a very unsettled feeling. It felt much more exhausting when I was younger."

As Odutola settles into to a new studio and apartment in New York City, and establishes a professional reputation, she likes being close to museums and a part of a thriving art community. She looks forward to seeing how her work will evolve in a fresh, new setting. She also looks back over her long experience of uprootedness and declares, "Now that I'm older it's liberating.

She likes that she's not limited or beholden to any one thing. "I don't completely commit to any one identity and that's okay. I'm aware of how an identity is invented." I remember my parents, like a lot of immigrant families, would invent or create a culture here in America that's almost like an exaggeration of their Nigerian-ness. It was strange to me because it felt like a hyperbole: hearing our parents speak in Yoruba very loudly and boisterously amongst themselves in ways they rarely spoke back home, seemed almost desperate since it was only emphasized in specific functions. I didn't resent it, I was fascinated by it, but I also didn't trust it. I felt like it was something they felt they needed to do to feel comforted and to establish something in a new land, a place that did not feel like their own. It wasn't a bad thing. They needed that illusion. We all do. We try our best to make do with what we have to make our parents feel better, to make ourselves feel better, but it's never authentic enough."

"Some kids made a lot of effort to learn the dances and their native tongue and others wanted to embrace their American-ness instead. I didn't feel fully committed to either side. I felt very ambivalent. My mom would probably just say I was a smart mouth."

"Growing up I would always be quick to tell my mom she was contradicting herself and she would say 'so what.' It's like the Walt Whitman quote, "So what if I contradict myself. I contradict myself." It's fascinating to me when exposing a lie becomes a good thing."

I AM NOT MY HAIR

In the series, *All These Garlands Mean Nothing*, Odutola explores women's relationship with their hair. "It really started by accident, I created a portrait of myself with long hair. But [Hurricane] Sandy happened and the work was damaged. The idea was stuck in my head for a long time. The image, it seemed to me was like another person. The concept of it stayed with me and I wanted to 'talk' to her," she explains.

"I started going through Facebook archives and I found cornrows, afros, braids, bleached hair, twists, weaves. Through the drawings I was re-acquainting myself with those personas. I always thought of them that way, as different personas. Every time I finished, I looked at these portraits as different people. All of these personas were like projections. Someone said (upon seeing the completed series in the exhibition) 'oh, they're all selfies.' But it's really not about that. It's about how they are all at odds with one another. It's like what Romare Bearden once said: 'They're all at issue.' That's what self-portraits capture, how we're always at issue with ourselves and our differing personas."



Toyin Oduola, *All These Garlands Prove Nothing (Redux)*, 2013, pen ink and marker on paper, 14x17 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

"All the politics of hair was very prevalent throughout the series. It's like looking at 14 different people. People who came to the show told me later that they returned home and started going through old pictures of themselves, looking at their old personas. Some conceptions of the malleable self I respect, especially those concerning women's identities. It's like a survival instinct. We're changeable for a reason because we don't want people to pin us down. I think we need to be slightly slippery in society because we can get too complacent in one position or in one stance. It can easily become something that we turn on. We try to freshen it and change things up. I suspect it helps us feel good but as a social tool, it's effective because it shows the different qualities we can embody and that's appealing to people. You

see it everywhere now in our society's current marketplace, people tend to hyphenate their professions and, ultimately, what they are capable of being: writer-director-natural hair- blogger-fashion designer, chemist, theoretician, psychologist...."

"Me? I just draw people. I'm ambivalent.... The one thing I really like within my work is contradiction."

BLACKNESS AT GROUND ZERO

The series, *Come Closer: Black Surfaces, Black Grounds*, is described as a personal rejection of everything associated with blackness, which Odutola admits is a very complicated work.

"*Come Closer* was me accepting black as a material, as an aesthetic meaning and a conversation. I used blackboard, black ballpoint pen ink and in some cases, black acrylic ink underneath and as a process I was looking up definitions of blackness and black identity in literal terms. I was reading a lot of Franz Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, alongside looking up artists such as Romare Bearden and Charles White with very modern takes on blackness and thinking about it as I was drawing the portraits."

"It was shocking to me how the material aspect took precedence and what it does to overshadow the reality of black identity with its descriptors. 'Flatness,' 'negative space,' 'darkness,' 'mystery,' 'impenetrable,' 'evil,' 'the unknown,'... those were just a few of many words I found describing 'blackness.' I was exploring the Western, linguistic landscape about how blackness was viewed religiously, economically, and politically, on so many levels. And here I was in a basic, concrete way drawing blackness and it expanded my mind. I was reading these definitions, the counter definitions, and the counter stances of those definitions seeing that I'm here in the 21st century creating new works and these words and the context still seeps into it even when I'm trying to remove or distance or emancipate that definition from itself."

"I'm doing black on black on black, trying to make it as layered as possible in the deepness of the blackness to bring it out. I noticed the pen became this incredible tool. The black ballpoint ink on blackboard would become cooper tone and I was like 'wow, this isn't even black at all!' The black board was like this balancing platform for the ink to become something else. I instantly recognized this notion, of how we think something is a certain way and in reality it is something else. This goes for individuals as well. What we think we are, we are not, the things that we project aren't inherently so. The aesthetic of it led me to push it further. It brought me to another question. What happens if you invert the image, like a negative of a photograph? (*Gauging Tone*, 2013) "This, in turn, led to more inquiries: 'What if you invert the black image and blackness in general, as a tangible, aesthetic thing, what happens?...' "

"I did that for a couple of drawings and it felt like a release for me, if that makes sense. This became a new series. I really love the series *Gauging Tone*, which was the title of this follow-up series. It was a very personal journey for me to see what I could do with the black image in a very limited but somewhat

inventive way and have it not be beholden to something else. The only thing black was the context that surrounded the subjects portrayed, literally the blackboard that they're drawn on. The images are not black. So the real question was 'when you invert the image does the meaning change?' The answer for me was sometimes 'yes' and sometimes 'no.' It's terrible.... I went back and forth. It was fascinating to see. Conceptually, it pushed me to explore how aesthetics can be an interesting segue into another dialogue in not just blackness but also perfection and how we tag on certain meanings to things, to people, even to context."

Black Men, Before You Put On That Sentence, You Are GOLDEN

Particularly among black men in America, Toyin says she noticed an invented attitude:

"I would have these conversations with my brothers and they'd be like 'I am a sentence, that's all I am and you need to respect that and acknowledge that.' They would be like: 'I already see it, I wake up in the morning, take off my du-rag and I'm good.' They're totally fine with that. And that fascinated me."

"There's a portrait in the show of my younger brother naked and he's sort of pinned down with his knee close to his chest, looking off to the side at the viewer. I was careful to title the piece which is "You Are Enough-- As Is". I think, so often, especially with my brother, men take on that sentence and push it up to the world. I think it's exhausting for him, and for many other men, to have that sentence pushed up in front of them, the sentence comes first and then he comes afterwards. He would never admit that to himself or anyone else. The sentence is up there by necessity. It's like an armor that he puts on and I wanted to shed that armor in the portrait and present him in a very vulnerable way and that's something that you do not do to Black men. They hate seeing themselves vulnerable, the history of that image, leads to a very dark path for them which is understandable."

"I drew him with a metallic golden Sharpie and he's literally golden. I told him, upon finishing the portrait: 'Look at you in this vulnerable state. You're golden. You are beautiful. You are enough. I respect you and your sentence but before you put on that sentence, this person exists and that person is you. And it's beautiful.' I wanted him to know that."

WE CONTAIN MULTITUDES, RE-IMAGINGING OUR STORY

"There are a lot of pieces like that in the series, "Gauging Tone," says Odutola.

"One of my favorite pieces is 'The Story of the Hunt Glorifies No One.' It's an homage to Chinua Achebe which goes into more specific things about colonization and the origins of blackness through the plans of colonization. The conceptual idea for the work, of the blackness, came from that history (colonization), because that's when slavery was justified. The title of the piece is a play on a Chinua Achebe quote from an interview in the *Paris Review*, where he talked about why it's so important for him to support the African post-colonial voice, the underdog. He cited a well-known proverb and said, "Until the lions have

their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. Once I realized that, I had to be a writer. I had to be that historian. It's not one man's job. It's not one person's job. But it is something we have to do, so that the story of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the travail—the bravery, even, of the lions.” Once I read that quote I thought, ‘of course Chinua, yes, we want to triumph over the hunter’s story that’s always been written.’ But me being the weird, ambivalent artist that I am I think, the problem isn’t so much the hunter or the lion, the problem is the hunt itself. We need to get out of this conversation entirely about this hunt because it seems to cause us problems—not simply for both sides, but for all sides That’s what the series *Gauging Tone* is all about...the story of the hunt glorifies no one. Even if I invert this image, it doesn’t change the situation. I’ve got to get out of the whole conversation to really get it.”

"Ultimately, the belief in the endless possibilities of a full-fledged person is one that Toyin Odutola wholeheartedly embraces. “I’m interested in invention. I’m interested in how we create all of these things on a whim, like in *All These Garlands*, —like the Walt Whitman quote, “I contain multitudes”, that’s brave, it’s so powerful."

"When you see my drawings, they are containers, right? The subjects are containers of these multitudes—of marks and landscapes and colors. They’re not real, they are 2-D figures in a picture plane, but what really is going on is those multitudes aren’t grounded in reality at all. When your imagination is aware of that and you willingly take that on, of course you can portray anyone, anything. It’s incredibly freeing as an artist in that way because you don’t feel restricted by any social code, aesthetic rule or formal standard. You can push past that. I love when people describe the drawings as a galaxy or the universe. It’s an incredible observation. That’s exactly where I want to go with this work. That’s something black people have avoided up until very recently and where we need to go.”

To view more of Toyin Odutola’s work visit: www.toyinodutola.com

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Interview

ART

TOYIN ODUTOLA AND THE PUBLIC STRUGGLE

BY JULIE BRAMOWITZ



Toyin Odutola. *Hold It In Your Mouth A Little Longer*, 2013. Charcoal, pastel, and graphite on paper. 40 x 30 inches. 48 x 37 1/2 x 1 3/4 inches framed. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Last week, 28-year-old artist Toyin Odutola was home for Thanksgiving, back in her childhood bedroom, where, as she recently posted on Instagram, "My past efforts haunt me. Ha!" Odutola isn't afraid to blog about her failures, successes, and everything in between; indeed, she says that her work is all about process. Now, 13 of her arresting pen-and-ink portraits, which caught the art world's attention after a sold-out show in Chelsea last spring, are the focus of Odutola's first solo museum exhibition, "The Constant Struggle," opening at the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art on December 6.

Born in Nigeria, raised in Alabama, and trained at the Bay Area's California College of the Arts, Odutola draws on references as diverse as her upbringing, from animated Japanese serials and African carvings to the sinews of anatomical diagrams. But the blank white backgrounds on which she'll place a disembodied arm or head, the subject's dark skin radiating with flashes of disco-colored strobe light, strip away any context, preventing viewers from creating narratives about who's pictured. Instead, with their open expressions, these figures look back at us, shifting power away from the audience by reflecting our own gaze, and calling into question ideas of identity and race.

At Art Basel Miami Beach this week, Jack Shainman Gallery presents Odutola's most ambitious work to date, a five-foot tall portrait from her latest series, while earlier pieces are currently on view in group shows at Brooklyn's Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA) and the Jenkins Johnson Gallery in San Francisco. Effusive, gracious—and quick to slip on an accent (Southern or Nigerian, depending on the story)—Odutola spoke over the holiday weekend about what's ahead and knowing when to let go of the past.

JULIE BRAMOWITZ: You recently relocated to New York. What has that been like as an artist, and do you find it distracting to work in a city with so much stimulation?

TOYIN ODUTOLA: It's been six months, and I'm not going to lie: It is *hard* to produce work in New York. You kind of have to center yourself—do some Zen meditation exercises and just focus. *[laughs]* It is very distracting, and money, of course, is an issue. I don't think I would have been able to make the work that I made for the show in May if it wasn't for me being in Alabama and away from New York, because it does have this way of influencing how you feel about your work. You hear outside voices and it permeates all that you do. But so much has happened for me in the studio here and I know that direct contact with inspiration wouldn't have happened if I didn't have access to what you have in New York, such as galleries, museums, lectures—what I could only access through the Internet in Alabama. I remember just recently going to the Edward Hopper show at the Whitney. Of course you read about his work in books, but to actually be in a room where you can study his hand, his mark, it changes your entire education.

BRAMOWITZ: You've mentioned Hank Willis Thomas as a mentor. Could you talk a bit about his influence on you as an emerging artist?

ODUTOLA: Oh, yeah. Hank says that I mention him too much, and I need to quit because people are starting to feel a certain way. So there's this joke between us that the next interview I do, I say, "I don't know who Hank Willis Thomas is. I met him one time and it was really awkward." *[laughs]* Hank's great. He's the one who "discovered" my work and saw something that I didn't see. He's still constantly pushing me to try out new ideas and not be afraid of what other people will say.

He truly is a mentor, and I often ask him about the art world, how to juggle it all and not lose your mind. It would be like accepting an award without thanking him because he really has been so supportive.

BRAMOWITZ: Since joining Jack Shainman Gallery, are there other artists whom you've had an opportunity to meet and whose work has informed what you're doing?

ODUTOLA: Jack's gallery is great, because there's a lot of people whose work I admire and I didn't even know were represented by him until I got there and was like, "Oh, shit!" I've had the chance to meet people that I think are icons, like Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Kerry James Marshall. Kerry James Marshall especially was a huge influence on me in graduate school, as were Wangechi Mutu and Julie Mehretu. These artists are titans. My education was also very much in comic books, so I've been going to comic book events in New York and have met a few artists there.

BRAMOWITZ: Anyone in particular?

ODUTOLA: Cathy G. Johnson, who does a lot of web comics. I love her style. It's very different from mine, so I don't know if people will see the connection, but I've definitely played with some things just looking at her work. Anthony Cudahy. Mostly indie artists that I've been following for a few years online. I'm really interested in independent publishers and memes and mini comics. But even before that, I was interested in Japanese manga and anime.

BRAMOWITZ: When you're creating a series, do you conceive of it like a graphic novel, in which there's a narrative and images are ordered as a sequence of events?

ODUTOLA: I think about composition and narrative a lot. Each piece, in a way, is a panel. It's easier to tackle it when you think about the silhouette in that contained space. The graphic style itself is influenced by a lot of very layered and detailed comics that I read as a kid, like *Vagabond* by Takehiko Inoue. Sometimes I'll do sequences or multi-panels where there's movement, kind of like a movie.

BRAMOWITZ: What's the story behind your latest series, "Of Another Kind"?

ODUTOLA: It came from a postcard that I bought at some museum store. It was a sculpture of a young boy in gilded bronze. His skin was black, and his hair was this shocking blond. His hands were above his head holding out a cigarette tray, and he was standing on top of this leafy gold setting. It was very strange and I didn't understand why I liked it. I hated the servitude aspect, that it was just for someone to put down their cigarette. But, as an aesthetic, I loved the black-and-gold combination repeated throughout. So I started researching references. The more examples I would find, the more I had to type in "Moorish sculpture" or "Moorish portraiture," the mode for portraying "Moors"—basically, blacks—in Medieval and Renaissance Europe. I liked the aesthetic but I didn't want to fetishize or perverse it, so that became a vehicle for me to explore it but without the subjects being exoticized or serving a purpose, like an ashtray. The title, "Of Another Kind," is about looking at this genre from another perspective. The series also changed how I consider restriction when it comes to palette.

BRAMOWITZ: For the golden sections, what are you using?

ODUTOLA: It's a Sharpie, girl! It's a gold Sharpie from Office Depot. The whole piece is first done in pen and ink to engrave the surface of the paper, and then once that dries, the areas that I want to be gold I go over with a marker. That gives it the texture underneath, but also the sheen of gold on top. It's important for me to emphasize texture, to get that sculptural feel, which is what influenced the entire series because I was largely looking at sculpture and reliefs.

BRAMOWITZ: You were born in Ife, Nigeria, which is known for its carved sculpture tradition. Did that play a role in your earlier work where you focused on faces and expressions?

ODUTOLA: Ironically, I didn't know about the Ife sculptures until I came to America. It's so funny that I would be doing this work that's heavily drawn off of scarification, striated lines, that whole aesthetic. When I went back to Ife for the first time with my mom, we visited the museum there, and I was blown away. Up to that point, I thought that this style of mine was just this weird amalgamation of all these disparate references, and it made perfect sense once I saw those pieces. There are mirrors with my work, especially with the faces, the emphasis on the head, which, of course, is identity. You rarely see the whole body, and it's usually dwarfed by the face. But it was absolutely something that I came to later. My mom always says, "It's like you're coming home."

BRAMOWITZ: I read in a previous interview that you've been wary of depicting women. What pushed you away from portraying female subjects and towards males?

ODUTOLA: For a while, I was nervous about portraying women because of the objectification that automatically comes with it, whether the artist intends or not. With "Of Another Kind," I've not so much drawn nudes—I hate saying "nudes" because it's not a spectacle—but portrayed people naked. I see them in a more straightforward way—exposed, but with no indication of who or what they are; they're just there. That's a very powerful statement because when they're stripped bare of everything, there's no marker for people to label them or place them in a box. I wanted to twist that, so I use my brothers a lot, portraying them naked, open, exposed. That's something you don't see a lot, especially with black males, unless it's referencing slavery or pain.

BRAMOWITZ: The focal point of this series is a departure for you: *Rather Than Look Back, She Chose To Look at You*, a five-foot female portrait that will be on view in Miami this week. You worked on this piece over three years?

ODUTOLA: I started it and was like, "Mom, I don't think I can finish this piece," and she was like, "No, you're not ready." [laughs] So it was just stored away, and every once in a while I would bring it out and work a little bit on it, and then I'd put it away again. Then I decided to move to New York and was like, "I'm not going to finish this. It's been in the basement and every time I come and work on it a little bit, it's just more depressing to me." But my mom kept saying, "Take it with you." So I took it back with me, put it up, and said, "You know what? If there's one thing I'm going to finish this year, it'll be this piece." I was sick of having it be incomplete and I just went H.A.M. on it. I spent a good four to five months working on it, along with other projects. Once I finished, the piece was really about me dealing with a past that I felt haunted by, about Ife, as well as about coming to terms with failure. Suddenly you find yourself in the present with a finished piece and going, "I'm done. I can't keep feeling a certain way about the past." That's what the title is about.

BRAMOWITZ: When you post works in progress on Tumblr and Instagram, is it essential to your process to document these phases online and gauge the reactions of fans?

ODUTOLA: I originally started blogging because I didn't know if I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to talk to other people online who were doing art, so I would post work and ask for feedback. I loved that an artist like James Sheehan would show his process on his blog. It became this open dialogue that, unfortunately, we don't have a lot in the fine-art world. People will say, "Wow, you share a lot." I'm like, "No, I make it a point to." Instagram is a great place for people to share failure. I don't want people to think that being an artist is some glamorous life. Not everybody is Jeff Koons. Not everybody *wants* to be Jeff Koons, you know? You go through a lot of battles in your studio. I'll say, "I'm having a certain feeling about this piece and it's not a good one." *[laughs]* People respond to that in a very positive way. There are moments when they tend to get a little too fresh or try to art direct. But I'm just lucky to have someone see the work and be a part of the process in real time.

BRAMOWITZ: You've got several group shows lined up this coming year. What else can we expect in 2014?

ODUTOLA: I recently started working in charcoal and pastel. I hadn't touched them since I was in high school or early college, but I had been working in pen and ink for so long that I was like, "Okay, I need to break free of this." So I just picked up a charcoal pencil that I had around the studio and started drawing this piece, *The Paradox of Education*. I don't know where it will go but I would say 2014 is going to be a year of different materials. The pen and ink was my hand's education; now my hand is applying that same style with new tools.

RATHER THAN LOOK BACK, SHE CHOSE TO LOOK AT YOU *WILL BE [ON VIEW](#) AT THE JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY AT ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH FROM THIS THURSDAY THROUGH SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5 THROUGH 8. "THE CONSTANT STRUGGLE: TOYIN ODUTOLA" [OPENS](#) AT THE INDIANA MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART THIS FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6. "SEVEN SISTERS" IS [ON VIEW](#) AT THE JENKINS JOHNSON GALLERY IN SAN FRANCISCO THROUGH DECEMBER 21. "SIX DRAUGHTSMEN" IS [ON VIEW](#) AT MOCADA THROUGH JANUARY 19.*



Toyin Odutola Captures The Multitudes Within Our Skin

By Emily Colucci
Posted on 06.05.13



In his iconic *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon explains, "I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth," which almost perfectly describes artist [Toyin Odutola's](#) exhibition *My Country Has No Name* at the [Jack Shainman Gallery](#). Transforming the human body into a luminous, rich and colorful visual landscape, Odutola's gorgeous and thought-provoking show, open until June

29, presents Odutola's deft artistic investigation into blackness and identity through her intricate line work.

From metallic Sharpie on black board to pen and marker on white paper, Odutola consciously selects her materials for their vibrant sheen. In addition to their artistic function, Odutola also enjoys using everyday materials such as ballpoint pens to create her almost paint-like surfaces. As she explains, "I love that my materials are cheap. I love that they are primarily regarded as office supplies, not art supplies; that by my utilizing these tools in such a way expands their consideration, making them more than what they are generally known for doing, limited to by perception."



Born in Nigeria and currently living in Alabama, Odutola's background heavily influences her focus on identity in her art. As she describes, "I've always felt ambivalent about my heritage and prescribed identity. There is something suspicious about labels: they define you in very concrete terms and they can emancipate you all the while potentially limiting and trapping you in place. The finite nature of labels often feels demanding to me in some way, so I try not to let myself get too attached or beholden to them. This process of tug and pull is often documented in my work."

Looking at the work and the title of *My Country Has No Name*, Odutola reveals that she "attempts to highlight the contradictions of commitment and disillusionment towards identity: how one is susceptible to it, how one can manipulate it and how one can disregard it altogether." Playing with her ability to artistically alter identity such as her complete color inversion in her series *Gauging Tones*, Odutola creates stunning portraits, which tread the line between realism and imagination.



In the series *All These Garlands Prove Nothing*, Odutola presents herself in various hairstyles ranging from dreadlocks to a shaved head. Changing her own identity through her hair, Odutola observes, "Identity in presentation changes so dramatically and can be altered on a whim—according to contexts, embellishments, ideas, and so forth. Hair (and the lack of it) being the focus of the series became the true subject to capture."

Not only portraying the interaction between identity and presentation, Odutola also references the historical significance of hair to the African American community. Odutola describes, "Considering the long and contentious history regarding women of African descent in the United States and their personal, socio-economic and political relationships with their hair, *All These Garlands Prove Nothing* nods at that larger dialogue."



Similarly, Odutola's radiant and unique treatment of black skin whether with metallic bronze Sharpie or multi-colored markers allows her to delve into the experience of having black skin. "When I began working this way, rendering the skin like this captured what I thought 'black skin' (in literal and visual terms) felt like," says Odutola, "The role of blackness in the work began as a personal investigation on the aforementioned 'feeling' of it, the material implications of it, and how these aspects could be showcased throughout the skin's landscape. Since then, it has progressed to expand the possibilities of what the meaning of 'blackness' (and in turn, "black skin") can entail."

Odutola's rendering of skin as a colorful landscape allows her work to transcend just one singular identity, encompassing and inspiring viewers with a wide variety of identifications. Asked how she wants to affect viewers, Odutola responds, "I only hope the individuals who view each drawing get an idea that what one is seeing is the many multitudes contained within all individuals, and how much of that is invention (which cannot be designated as "good" or "bad," 'right' or 'wrong.')

Images courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



Toyin Odutola "My Country Has No Name"

The Nigerian-born, Alabama-based artist discusses process, identity and selfies

by James Thorne in Culture on 16 May 2013



A recent graduate of California College of the Arts, **Toyin Odutola** is already celebrating her second show at **Jack Shainman Gallery** in NYC. The energetic artist produces ink works on paper from her studio in Alabama, updating friends and fans through an active blog. At 27 years old, Odutola is unabashed of her millennial status, exclaiming of her self-portraits as she walks through the gallery, "There are a lot of selfies—let's just call it out!" But behind the humor, there is a seriousness. The exhibition, called "**My Country Has No Name**," takes on race, nationhood and identity through the fine tip of a ballpoint pen.



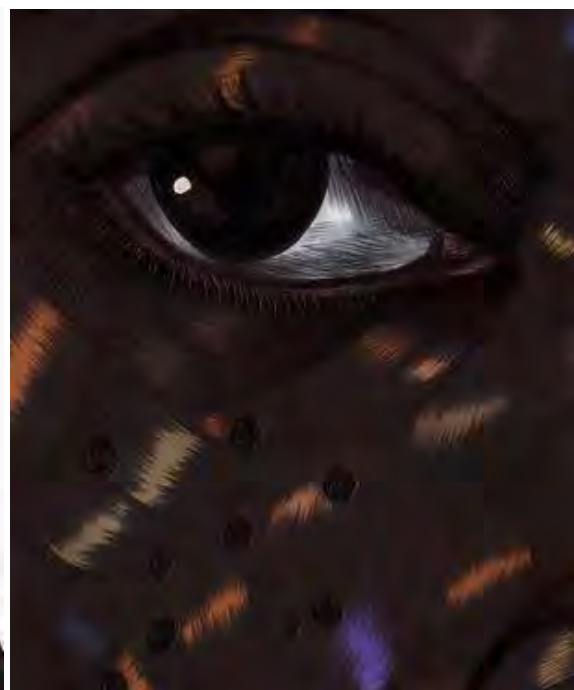
Nigerian-born Odutola's series of self-portraits takes the name "All These Garlands Prove Nothing," a reference to the artist's protean hair style. "The portraits go from me having this crazy afro to punk dreadlocks with a half-shaved head, long braids, this Grace Jones 'Eraserhead' look—but it's the idea of the artifice of a presentation and how malleable a persona is," she says. The artist also catalogues friends and family members; mostly young and mostly bored. "I like awkward or candid moments that just look off," Odutola continues. "Disillusioned and blah—it sort of represents our generation. We've seen so much and we're so bored."



Odutola seems to be fed up with the wall that traditionally hides process from final product. Her **Tumblr** is made up of candid shots of works in progress that are meant to explain her methodology. "I'll be honest—I started the blog because I grew up in the south where there was no access to any museums or galleries," she explains. "So my ticket to people was the internet. If I was going to get into this world that I had no idea how to navigate, I wanted it to be honest."



The surface effect—the result of layering pen on marker—gives Odutola's figures a distinctive shimmer and patchwork quality, and opinions differ on what to make of it. "People have a different response [to the effect] each time—I've heard muscle, hair, wires. Someone said it looks like a nightclub and there's a light show shining on the face." For the artist, the main visual component is the blocked-off quadrants that underly the surface-level work, a sort of puzzle that creates the planes of the face. In terms of color, Odutola has taken pains to represent a "multifaceted brown" that is applied to each subject, regardless of race.



Odutola's inclusion in Forbes' **30 Under 30** list for notable names in arts and style puts her in a league with artists like JR and Jacob Kassay. Despite her success, the artist remains humble. She thanks predecessors like Chuck Close, whose process-heavy portrait work was an influence early on, and apologizes for subjecting gallery-goers to so many pictures of her "mug."



"My Country Has No Name" runs at Jack Shainman Gallery through 29 June 2013.

Portrait by James Thorne; all other images courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

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THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

Toyin Odutola

From Quiet Subtleties Come Shared Revelation

Adwoa Adusei

Standing face to face with one of Toyin Odutola's portraits of single figures against unadorned backgrounds is a study in the subtleties of depth. One discerns that the apparently flat surface is actually incised with precise grooves from a ballpoint pen, and an undercurrent of white, black or colorful washes. Her subjects' skin is made up of hundreds of singular, sinuous lines that coalesce into facial features. Mass and shape are not conveyed through linear shading techniques such as hatching, and the washes rarely indicate form. Instead they obscure the figure so that the source of light seems undetectable. In more recent work, the multi-colored washes combine with the flowing lines to create the effect of light reflected on water, further obstructing the viewer's discernment of depth. The manipulation of color and line to indicate shape is made even more complex by Odutola's stringent use of a minimal palette.

The chromatic scheme of her earlier works remained faithfully the same—usually black pen and ink on white paper—and continues to be a signature of Odutola's oeuvre. The title of her MFA thesis exhibition at California College of the Arts, *Come Closer: Black Surfaces, Black Grounds* (2012), is a distillation of Odutola's current material choices. In this series, black ballpoint pen and black acrylic ink on black glossed or matte board exemplify Odutola's self-described "almost monastic" use of materials.¹ The consistency with which she plays with these media energizes her visual lexicon so that she isn't beholden to draw only "black on black" portraits, but to build nuance through selectivity. In Odutola's own words, the problems in "a chroma that doesn't exist outside of the two-dimensional space" surface through her work, revealing that the black materials she uses are never true black. For example, some black pen inks are more copper in tone, while some black matte papers appear blue. These gradations are also apparent in Odutola's color-infused works of 2011. With these works, the eye excites over the muted yet rich and glossy jades, violets and blues that shine through.

The tactility of Odutola's work conveys her increasing interest in pushing texture beyond the drawing surface as a means of heightening experiential depth. After a recent trip to Japan, this interest has come to be expressed in Odutola's concern with conveying the correlation between mapping land/cityscapes and portraiture. She recounts how the bright lights of nocturnal Tokyo reflected on her brother's skin, as if projecting through him. He absorbed the environment around him almost to the point of obscuring him to invisibility. Attempting to capture this image of her brother-in-cityscape would address the complexity

involved in combining personage and location in drawn portraiture. How does one capture a place and a time through the body, and what medium would best do the job? As Odutola describes it, graphic artists have done so successfully for years, and she refers to her first encounter with a Lucian Freud (1922–2011) self-portrait: She travelled through the painting's surface and colors to see "both a portrait and a place." Citing Kerry James Marshall's (b. 1955) illustrations of blackness, Odutola remarks how place and person can convincingly become intertwined through an artist's selection of media.² This brings to mind the large un-stretched canvases of Marshall's 1998 *Mementos* exhibition (The Renaissance Society at the Institute of Chicago) in which "souvenirs" of the black American experience—important people and places—are commemorated.³ In 2010, Odutola experimented with paper sculpture, and graphic-novel panels influence her more recent GIF animations.⁴ Unlike Marshall's multimedia oeuvre—works that often begin as drawings—Odutola's works currently manifest persistently as drawings on paper.

These brief explorations between media, particularly animation, together with Odutola's use of the Internet to enhance viewer experience of her artistic process, speak to a desire to connect with wider audiences. This desire is shared by contemporary artists of the African diaspora and contemporary artists worldwide as a solution to some of New Internationalism's failures to merge contemporary art worlds through wider accessibility.⁵ Odutola's interest in creating visual variety for audience interaction is notable in her blog, where she allows viewers to see her creative influences and progressions.⁶ However, Odutola admits that reproductions online do not compare to in-person experience. In person, color schemes and textures change according to the viewer's angle. Online, this nuance is subdued, and the flattening of the



RIGHT

—
I Had Her and Then I Lost Her (detail),
2012

OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP

—
Untitled, 2011

MIDDLE

—
Above all else make it look effortless, 2012

BOTTOM

—
D.O./H.W.T. Study, 2011



picture plane via an electronic screen serves to both limit and enhance the subtleties of legibility.⁷ Ironically, this degree of digital separation actually mimics the idea that perception can change according to how one experiences something—particularly race. Speaking of the color as a medium, Odutola says that “black is a construct, because what precisely is it made up of?” The question appropriately relates to race as a social construct.

This conflation of color and race, combined with the stringency of Odutola’s material choices, is a play on black portraiture, a subject that explores issues of representation, social agency and race. The image of the black body as a conflicting yet fetishized symbol of profit, desire, pity and fear is central to the subject. In Odutola’s black portraits, the primacy of the color black as “constructed” becomes apparent as a reenvisioning of the subject’s vocabulary. In these small portraits, black is always something else, always changing, so the viewer’s perception and experience of the work, too, is always changing. In the minute space of each scene, Odutola personalizes her renderings of the people in her life, mapping out the details of their lives as she sees them. Rarely working on paper larger than 20-by-30 inches, she works with a scale that allows for intimacy in the viewing experience—yet without knowing who the people are. Her subjects are of different races, genders and ages, but Odutola’s faithful and skillful manipulation of media diffuses concerns regarding identity markers. Often appearing youthful and androgynous, figures become almost indistinguishable from the stark, shallow spaces that contain them. It is only

the texture of their skin, like the fleshy tendons of one’s musculature, that indicates human markers. But each figure, no matter his or her identity, is stripped bare. Visually traversing the paths and lines of Odutola’s work reveals layers that express the commonality of human experience.

1 Toyin Odutola, interview with the author, July 27, 2012.

2 Ibid.

3 Kerry James Marshall et al., *Kerry James Marshall: Mementos* (Chicago: Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1998).

4 The “Masks” series of 2010 is a set of drawings on vellum paper in which the impressions of the pen on the vellum paper causes it to protrude into three-dimensional space. Odutola’s GIF animations are built from several drawings synced together, and are ongoing since 2011.

5 New Internationalism is a conceptual and practical framework for exhibition practice and art historical discourse born out of postcolonial theory’s influence within the arts. Following the 1991 establishment of the Institute of New International Visual Arts in London, New Internationalism is loosely defined by Lotte Philipsen as “an attitude that aims at institutional inclusion of non-Western visual art.” Since there are more artists than there are global institutions to exhibit and house their work, many contemporary artists (with access and the means to do so) continue to explore use of the Internet and social media as means of increasing exposure and accessibility. Lotte Philipsen, *Globalizing Contemporary Art: The Art World’s New Internationalism* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2010).

6 Toyin Odutola’s blog can be seen at www.tobia.tumblr.com

7 Interestingly enough, Kerry James Marshall’s *Black Painting* (2003) of an interior scene inspired by Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1952), made primarily of black acrylic paint on fiberglass, is also disarmingly hard to reproduce through photography. Kerry James Marshall: *One True Thing: Meditations on Black Aesthetics* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003).

New Editions: Toyin Odutola

A Lapse in Judgement (2012)

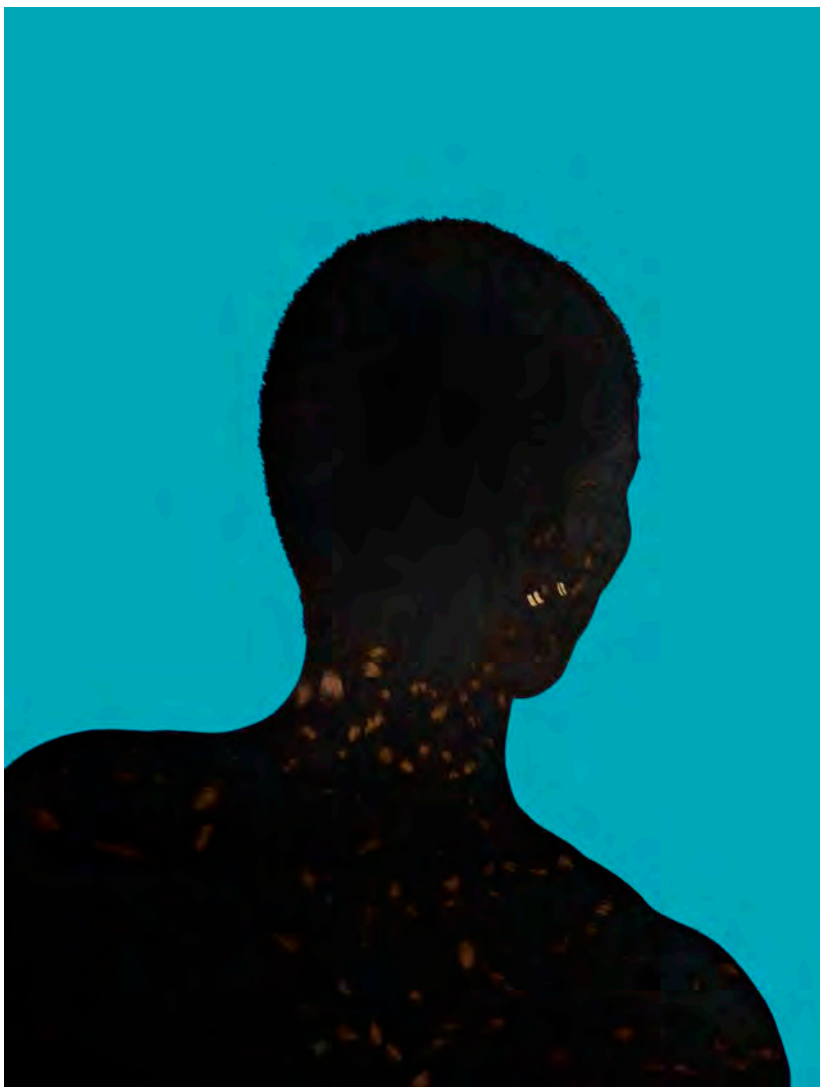
One-color lithograph, 9 x 7 inches. Edition of 10. \$800. Two-color lithograph, 14 x 11 inches. Edition of 10. \$900.

If she doesn't say anything, then it never happened (2012)

One-color lithograph, 25 x 19 inches. Edition of 28. \$1000. Three-color lithograph, 25 x 19 inches. Edition of 16. \$1200. Printed and published by Tamarind Institute, Albuquerque, NM.

For more than half a century Tamarind has been offering residencies to up-and-coming artists, hoping to lure them into prolonged engagement with lithography (and to give Tamarind printers-in-training exposure to disparate artistic aims and approaches). It can be hit-or-miss, and Toyin Odutola is very young (she just received her MFA this year), but one glance at her ink drawings, with their brilliantly carved silhouettes and scattered moments of sinewy shine, was probably enough to convince Tamarind to lay odds on her printmaking.

Odutola's residency was part of a larger Tamarind project that brought together artists of African descent from Brazil and the United States. (Odutola was born in Nigeria, grew up in Alabama, and lives in California.) Implicit in such a project are themes of displacement and otherness. Odutola, however, is less interested in blackness as a foil to whiteness, but as something in and of itself—a color, a graphic device, a cultural identity. This is a set of concerns ready-made for print processes. Two of the prints she did at Tamarind



Toyin Odutola, *If she doesn't say anything, then it never happened* (2012).

were black on white and dynamically graphic. Two other images, however, were released in both black-and-white and color versions. But while “color lithograph” usually suggests something more vibrant than its binary cousin, Odutola has used blue and brown to replace contrast and clarity with a kind

of twilight shine. Forms loom out of darkness rather than asserting themselves as pattern.

In these images Odutola challenges the assumption that the black marks disrupting white surfaces is some universal norm. It's an idea with profound implications. ■

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

Reflections

By HOLLAND COTTER, KEN JOHNSON, KAREN ROSENBERG and ROBERTA SMITH

Published: January 3, 2013

With New Year's hoopla behind us, we begin to turn a corner on the season of long nights and short days. But there's still a good stretch of darkness ahead, and New York City museums have their lights on bright.

Illumination has been a subject and condition of art since prehistoric painters at the Lascaux caves positioned their images to catch the rays of the sun at winter solstice. Great classical cultures across the globe spun visions of the universe around the presence of solar and lunar deities. To designers of stained-glass church windows in medieval Europe light was divine benevolence in sensible form. To the Muslim creators of lusterware in the Arab world radiance as a decorative property helped bind together the widely dispersed faithful.

Painted dawns and sunsets carried spiritual, political and personal messages for Romantic landscape artists in America and Europe. Light was scientific data to the French Impressionists, the raw material of an optical sublime. In our own era, when art has no center or has centers everywhere, light as a medium has atomized into countless forms and meanings, from fluorescent tubes and video screens to glittering magpie-eye scraps and painted rainbows.

With the prospect of considerable midwinter indoor time still to come, four art critics for The New York Times recently fanned out into museums in search of art that captured light, or referred to it, or generated it. **HOLLAND COTTER**



Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

"26 July, 4:50 am," by Toyin Odutola, the Studio Museum in Harlem.

'26 JULY, 4:50 AM' BY TOYIN ODUTOLA, STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

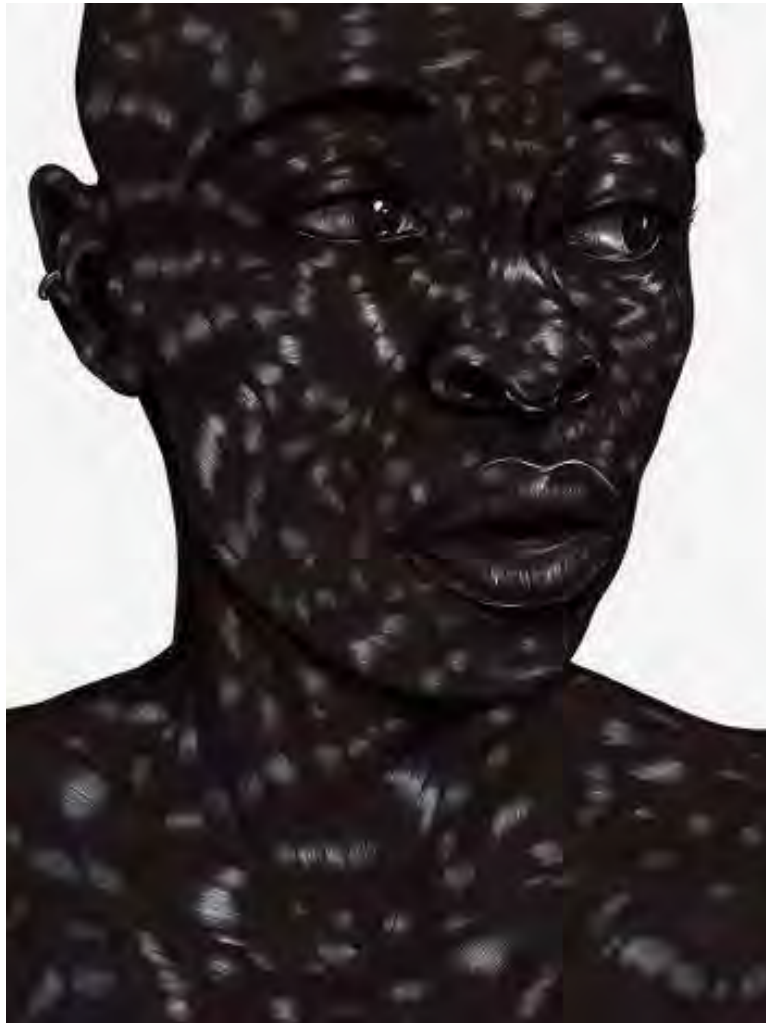
The young Ms. Odutola is a Nigerian-born portraitist who works in blackness and light. Taking family members and friends as sitters, she begins each bust-length likeness with a loose sketch done in color washes, then fills it with patterns of tight, narrow, precisely drawn linear bands done in ballpoint pen.

The bands cross over and under one another like weaving or like the tissues and sinews of musculature, creating subtle highlights where they curve, giving the skin a subtle luster. And no matter how dense and black looking the patterns are, the facial features of the sitters come through in minute detail, literally eyelash by eyelash.

In one sense Ms. Odutola is interested in examining notions of blackness as a race-defining attribute, one that can make people, depending on the context, either invisible or vulnerable. Certain other, older artists, notably Kerry James Marshall, have done remarkable and complex things with the concept of blackness as a graphic marker of race, and Ms. Odutola, whose work can be seen in a group show called [“Fore”](#) at the Studio Museum in Harlem, takes the idea in a direction of her own. The blackness in her portraits is not blackness at all, in an essential, finite way.

The ballpoint ink colors she uses range from copper-brown to deep blue. Her sitters range across the ethnic spectrum. The colors that begin each portrait show through at the end. Beaming through chinks in the dark weave they look like stars in a night sky or filtered rainbows. **HOLLAND COTTER**

‘The Moment for Ink’: Show frees artist



Toyin Odutola's "Whenever the occasion arises"
Pen ink and marker on paper 9 x 12 inches (2012)
Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

By Kimberly Chun
Friday, March 22, 2013

Arrayed among the more traditional sumi ink works at the [Chinese Culture Foundation](#)'s group show, "The Moment for Ink," [Toyin Odutola](#)'s dark, textured ballpoint-ink-and-marker drawings pop - in their intensity, richness and blackness. The very qualities of the work of the Nigerian-born artist, who is often slotted into shows as an African American woman, make this exhibition a special one for her.

"Being a black artist, the first thing people want to talk about is your blackness, the importance of your blackness and your black presence. What I like about this show is that I felt free from that blackness and I could really exploit the pen and do crazy patterns and have that be the focal point of it," says Odutola, 27, who graduated from California [College](#) of the Arts last year. "I'm celebrating the ink and what it can do and transforming what it can be."

"It's also nice to have something that came with such a rich history with Chinese literati and the rich history of pen ink and how it's used as a tag in China," adds Odutola, who is now working in Alabama on her May solo show for Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City. "In the fine art world in America, you don't see a lot of pen ink unless it's graphic novels."

The mangas that once inspired Odutola are far away: The self-portraits she made for the exhibit are both eerily anatomical and strangely futuristic, as if she had traced the rhythmic weave of musculature beneath her skin. In "No Difference at All," a figure skeptically regards the viewer from beneath her lids, and in "Whenever the Occasion Arises," she peers to the side, the whites of her eyes satiny and the almost bronze pen strokes resembling those of a tress-obsessed Arcimboldo.

"It's kind of a language I've developed over time that's basically breaking up the face into components and planes," Odutola says of her work. "Inside each plane, I draw gradation marks, and when planes come together, they form sinews, a hairlike weave that's like a landscape of the face."

She ventures a comparison to the portrait deconstructions of Chuck Close: "It's an abstraction that happens from looking really hard and long at a face," she says. "I hope that, looking at these portraits, you'll see a person underneath that mark making."

If you go:

The Moment for Ink: Through May 18. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Chinese Culture Foundation, 750 Kearny St., S.F. (415) 986-1822. www.c-c-c.org.

Q&A: Toyin Odutola on Drawing, Chinese Art, and What It Really Means to Have a Big Head

The portrait artist readies for a group show at the Studio Museum in Harlem

By [Alexandra Bell](#) Wednesday, Nov 7 2012



Odutola's Bored, Doe-Eyed and Waiting; Courtesy of Toyin Odutola and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY



Toyin Odutola; Courtesy the artist and Studio Museum in Harlem

Toyin Odutola's pen-and-ink drawings are part of the upcoming group show "Fore" at the Studio Museum in Harlem (November 11 through March 10). "Fore" is the fourth installment in Studio Museum's "F" series, which showcases the work of newer artists of African descent. Held every four years, the "F" series has exhibited work from some of today's premiere black artists. At just 27, Odutola is quickly becoming a noted portraitist. In 2011, her first solo show at Jack Shainman Gallery—they represent her—sold out before opening day.

Born in Ife, [Nigeria](#), Odutola moved with her family to [Berkeley, California](#), at the age of five and later to [Huntsville](#), Alabama. Her drawings, which she typically creates with just an everyday ballpoint pen, often arise from an encounter with an interesting face and evolve into near-multidimensional statements on identity.

The *Voice* chatted with Odutola via video about black images, art in Alabama, and why the face makes for better art than the body.

You started getting serious about art in college. What kind of work were you doing?

I was doing all kind of things. When you start college, you do a lot of foundation courses—you do painting, you do graphic design. Drawing was something I was interested in since I was very little, but I didn't really know that drawing was something I was going to keep doing after college—it was just something I kind of did on my own. And the style developed—that I'm kind of known for now—developed in college on my own. I was playing around with the contours of the face and different components and things and it fell

from that. I graduated, and of course you don't have a job, and you're sitting in your parent's basement and you keep drawing and working at McDonald's and then you kind of build and build and build. I built up a portfolio I thought was strong, and applied to grad school at CCA. I just graduated. I don't really know how I got here—just some steps—step after step.

A majority of your work depicts the human face. Why did you choose that part of the body?

It's two things. One, I'm more interested in the face than the body. I sometimes feel like the body—and this could be my own projection—but I feel like the body is contentious, and whenever you show a body, whether male or female, immediately people kind of have this image with representational work. People say, "Oh, that's a penis" and "Oh, those are breasts." Human beings cannot separate—it's just a go-to thing. And for me, it's about identity, so identity doesn't necessarily have to be a body—it has to be identifying a face. The conversation is more interesting when it's directly looking at the face, the countenance.

Secondly, I'm really fascinated by this concept in [Benin](#) ancient sculpture, which came from where I was born, in Ife. Benin sculpture is all about the face—the face in Yoruba culture is often referred to as the "crown," and it's the most important part. If you look at a lot of sculpture from Nigeria in this time—12th century and 16th century—the head's always bigger than the body. You always see sculptures where the head's huge and the body is tiny. My dad would always joke with me and say, "Us Nigerians are very big-headed." [Laughs.] No, I think it's about identity. I'm attracted to that, I'm attracted to the face more.

And black figures? You draw primarily black figures.

Yes and no. It's a trick.

How so?

Of course they're black figures because they're drawn in black pen, but not all of the figures are of African American descent, or at least the reference isn't. One of the things I like to play with is, "What is black?" Is it because I drew it? Is it because it looks black? Is it because you think the figure is black? Because a lot of it is just a filter, and the filters get more and more obstructed by whatever people think the image is about and not really what it is. So often times I don't tell people a lot about the work because I think they create a mythology around it, which is far more interesting than what it actually is. I give little tidbits in titles, but I like that there's a slight ambiguity—not too much—but enough so people can invent their own stories.

How does the color of your subject influence the way you approach your art?

One thing that I'm very interested in is composition and how interesting the gaze is. Often I'll take a photo of someone—they can be Asian or black or white, and I just really like their face. I want to take their face and put it into this image. Of course, that could be me just inventing a character too—I'm not going to deny that—but a lot of times, it's the face. It's hard to describe. Sometimes, I see something in a photo and think, that'd be really interesting to draw. What would that mean if I drew that, and how would it take on a different sort of identity or form if I took these things out of context and recreated it in this way? A lot of my work is decontextualized—there's no background because there's enough information on the face as it is. I don't need to give it some fields of glory and Tuscan villas.

You work primarily with pen and ink—are you thinking of incorporating any other tools?

Yeah. I have acrylic ink underneath, markers, ink wash, and I work with a variety of surfaces. It's all white background when you see it digitally, but the actual surface could be a really glossy board or a really toothy paper and that literally looks completely different in person than when it's scanned and put online. The surface is very important because the tactility of the work is really, really interesting. The geography to me is the story, and when you create something that's very sort of striated, and heavily layered and textured, that to me is like a story. You read that story through those lines—the surface of that is also equally important. If you have a very rough textured paper, that adds to the story of the face. I hope I don't do pen ink the rest of my life. I'm sure that'll probably destroy me in a few years.

You give the viewer access to your work on your site. Why?

One of the reasons I wanted to start the blog is because I wanted to show people the process of the work and also how boring it is. When I started the blog in 2009 there was this sort of myth around artists. Being an artist is not that grand. It's you, alone in a studio, drawing or painting, and it is very tedious and repetitive. Sometimes you'll go over things and it won't look like change, but it is a huge change for you, so

I would always update those things on my page. It is a very long process. But that's why you do it—you do it because you love it.

Do you think people have more of an appreciation for the process since they can see it on your blog?

Yeah. The demystifying aspect of it, I think, really attracts people, 'cause it's just very barebones. And I tell them each stage, or I play coy. For the most part, I think people appreciate something that's straightforward. I think for some artists it's better economically for them not to talk about their process, and that's fine—that's their business.

How so?

I was talking to someone in grad school and they were like, I would never post my process, someone might steal it.

I don't know if I decided to take my ballpoint and draw something if that'd work out.

If someone happens to steal my process, good for them, 'cause it's extremely tedious. If they can do it, I will personally come up to them and hug them and say, "You too, you too—great!" But I like the blog format because it also allows me to backtrack. I can go back and see things from a piece I did a month ago. How did I work that part out? How did I do that? You know, it actually helps me work with future work, so it serves both ways.

Who are some of your favorite artists?

Oh god! How much time do you have? I love [Lucien Freud](#), almost obsessively. I cannot not say [Kara Walker](#), because then I'd be doing a disservice to all black women artists—everywhere. [Kerry James Marshall](#), of course. Gosh! There are a butt-load of Chinese artists, but I can't remember their names right now. At. All. It's a shame, 'cause they're really good. Korehiko Hino, he's a Japanese painter—really great painter. A lot of Japanese manga, which people would never think, but I love Japanese manga. I've read it since I was in grade school, and a lot of my style came from it. Uh, I should give cool answers, shouldn't I?

No. You don't want it to be a typical list, you want people to go and look it up. You got Kara Walker in there.

Yea, I got the prerequisites down. But yeah, it's a variety.

Why the Chinese artists?

One of the things that's happening now is there are a lot of Chinese artists in blogs and art magazines. And so you read them, and you say, "Wow, that's visually striking, and it's so different aesthetically from anything I've seen before." A lot of that work is coming from a different historical perspective, so a lot of what they're painting, and colors they're using, and the styles are just a different reference from what a Western-influenced artist has. It's very inspiring to me because it says I can break the rules and still be aesthetically pleasing.

I really believe formally in work. I think sometimes there's a lot about the message and not about how formal it is, and beauty—if you dare say the word—they're very beautiful works. A lot of these Chinese painters and draftsmen and printmakers make just really powerful stuff—very detailed. For me, if you put a lot of detail and a lot of time into the work, it's a gift to the viewer: I'm gorging on this—it's so beautiful and luscious! That's sort of what I'm really interested in—opulence and aesthetic.

China is a ways away—you're in Alabama right now. What's the art scene like there?

It's very crafty. It's interesting. I'm actually right next to a collective called Lowe Mill, and they own studios that you rent out, and they're pretty nice. There are a lot of people here that have gallery representation in New York. It's super-cheap to live here, and you just go to New York when you have to work—that's your job. I've always thought I was going to move to New York at some point—it's like what you do. But right now, with student loans and everything, it's not really feasible—the dream is not practical.

What's next?

There are a lot of group shows all over the States. They're all kind of happening. It's exciting. I'm kind of shocked that people want me in their museums and galleries. I always look at my work and think, this is so weird—people are gonna think my drawings are aliens. My brother always walks in and says, "Why do you draw me so weird?" Sorry, it's kind of what I like.



Toyin Odutola's diptych *Default Position (Study)*, 2011, drawn with pen and marker on paper.

Toyin Odutola was in her first year of the MFA program at the California College of the Arts when alumnus Hank Willis Thomas—an artist whose work she so admired that it had influenced her choice of graduate school—came to deliver a lecture. When Odutola wasn't selected for a studio visit with Thomas, the Nigerian-born artist made a personal appeal. "After his talk, I introduced myself and said, 'Hey, I love your work and if you have a chance, maybe I could show you mine.' He literally looked at me and said, 'No.'"

But shortly thereafter, Odutola, now 26, learned that the visiting artist had stopped by her studio. As Thomas tells it, he felt guilty that he'd denied her request and looked around her studio when she wasn't there. Taken with her painstakingly detailed ballpoint-pen portraits of African American subjects, Thomas sent images of her drawings to his gallerist, Jack Shainman. Last spring, Odutola had her first solo show at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. "Every time I see Hank, I tell him I owe him my first born," she says. Her works now sell for between \$3,200 and \$12,000.

Odutola moved to Northern California from Nigeria at the age of five, and later relocated to Alabama when her father, a chemist, took a job there. Feeling isolated in her new environment, Odutola began to draw more frequently. She went on to study art at the University of Alabama, Huntsville, where the foundations of her labor-intensive style emerged.



Toyin Odutola.

Odutola starts with a rough sketch on board or paper. She sometimes incorporates shards of color, adding acrylic ink or marker, then builds up the drawing with layer upon layer of ballpoint pen. The result is a richly textured portrait set against a stark white background. "The pen and ink is like a container that reveals and also hides," says the artist, who usually depicts friends and family. "The more information I give in terms of mark-making or texture, the more the person's state of mind is revealed."

A fan of storytelling—Odutola counts the writer Zadie Smith among her influences—she has begun to explore narrative in multipanel works. In a diptych titled *Default Position (Study)*, 2011, a young shirtless man hunches over, staring meekly off in the distance in one panel. In the other, he sits upright, directly addressing the viewer. Odutola is also experimenting with larger formats. Glancing at a 20-by-30-inch portrait-in-progress of her brother, she says, half-joking, "This one's going to kill me."

—Rebecca Spence

Rebecca Spence is a writer based in Berkeley, California. She is currently at work on her first novel.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Toyin Odutola creates viscerally stunning, intricately detailed images that are redefining the perception

of contemporary African art, how we look at the world and how we view ourselves. The Nigerian-born, American-raised artist employs a painstakingly thorough creative process that uses rudimentary tools – ballpoint pens, ink and paper – to investigate perceptions of ‘blackness’, gender and place. Seems like a handful for an artist who is just going into the second year of her Masters in Fine Arts at California College of the Arts. Already Odutola’s street buzz has caught the eye of both major collectors and celebrities, such as Solange Knowles. This spring she opened her first major solo exhibition, MAPS, at New York’s Jack Shainman gallery. As expected, it was an instant hit.

Since 2004 San Francisco-based Odutola’s artistic practice has evolved from imaginary into a more sequential cinematic narrative, featuring herself as the subject. Her work, both simple and detailed at the same time, stimulates a dialogue between the artist and the viewer. And it has a rawness – in part due to the medium of ballpen, part due to its microscopic imagery – that leaves the viewer in an emotional trance as they seek to decode it. What is striking about Odutola’s work is the absence of the typical cultural tropes associated with many popular contemporary African artists. “If I were too specific about my Nigerian identity, it would become this eroticisation of Nigeria,” she says. “I don’t feel like I’m an accurate participant in creating that narrative.”

Using her artistic platform as a conduit for women to create their own narrative, Odutola believes that, “we are active participants in decolonising our own spaces” and her art is a catalyst that ignites fresh debate around concepts of self. Certainly at the show opening in May, there was much discussion about what her imagery represented, literally, between the lines. “In many ways, it’s an exploration of the limits and possibilities of contradiction,” she told Think Africa Press. “The ability to transfer experiential geography onto a person never fails to excite me.”

□ www.toyinodutola.com

□ [tobia.tumblr.com](https://tumblr.com/tobia)

WORDS LARRY OSSE-MENGAH

Expanding the Aesthetic Horizon

SHARON F. PATTON

IN COLLECTING ART BY ARTISTS OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA, our lives are enriched, a legacy is achieved and artistic representation of the African Diaspora is secured. To acquire art, especially most recent art, is to assume a degree of risk. But it is praiseworthy. It is faith in a creative undertaking that has been underserved and under-represented in the global art community.

Overall the art represented in this issue shows an aesthetic that denotes hybridity — a vibrant cross-fertilization of cultures and artistic genres. Familiar signifiers such as race, gender, sexuality, and social and political inequities, continue as before. Very evident among these artists' works is an interest in history, specifically mid-20th century modernism (which reflects their academic training). Not surprisingly, given recent reports on global demographics which show population shifts to cities, urbanity is the dominant visual context for much of the art today. And while the black body continues as a powerful visual metaphor of dislocation and difference, these artists are skeptical yet optimistic.

A growing number of African-born artists have joined and enriched the international art scene. Among them are Nnenna Okore and Toyin Odutola. Okore's monumental wall sculptures — dyed and braided fiber, clay, burlap, handmade and recycled paper — as in *Akwa Ocha* (2009) are akin to works by El Anatsui. *When the Heavens Meet the Earth* (2011) exemplifies the cacophony of texture and color that typifies Okore's works where fluidity

juxtaposes structure and opacity juxtaposes transparency, creating a simulacrum of nature and biology.

Odutola's figurative drawings meticulously rendered in pen and/or acrylic ink are hypnotic as in *Uncertain, Yet Reserved (Abuja Airport Nigeria)* (2012). A singular black figure surrounded by white surface is a foil upon which we ascribe our prejudices, fears and prohibitions. Our respective perception of blackness is unavoidable as a formal metaphorical subject.

Deborah Grant's large collage-paintings and collages are a refreshing conflation of biography, social history and art history. Adroitly using familiar Dadaist/Surrealist techniques with underlying anarchistic humor, Grant provides a skewed commentary and succinct narrative about an alternative art history of modernism as shown in *By the Skin of Our Teeth* (2001), a series based on the life of Bill Traylor, and *The Provenance and Crowning of King William*, (2012) based on the life and art of William H. Johnson.

One of the few artists who closely approximate the inter-relationship between visual arts and modern music is Jennie C. Jones. Actual recording media such as tapes or CD boxes or abstract paintings, all of which are stylistically Minimalist, mimic musical scores when installed, e.g., *Acoustic Paintings* (2011, part of an installation titled *Absorb/Diffuse*). Jazz and avant-garde music contrasts with devices from which no sound is emitted. The presence and absence of sound within a particular



Nnenna Okore
Egwu Ukwu, 2009.
clay and burlap, 30 x 65 x 7"



Nnenna Okore
When the Heavens Meet the Earth, 2011
burlap, dye and acrylic, varied dimensions.



(top right)
Jennie Jones
Semitone-Bar, 2011
acoustic absorber
panel, black gesso
and acrylic glaze on
canvas, 24 x 48"

(top left)
*Resonance at
1/3*, 2011
acoustic absorber
panel, 'carbon black'
& fluorescent acrylics
on canvas, 24 x 48"

(left)
Deep Tone, 2011
acoustic absorber
panel, black gesso
and acrylic glaze on
canvas, 24 x 48"
Courtesy of the artist.

installation format allude to memory and the obsolescence of culture and the manner in which we engage it.

In *Oh, Johnnie Ray (My Brother)* (2010) or *The Long Jump by Carl Lewis* (2010), color saturation, brevity of line, simple shapes — cityscapes and people reminiscent of figurative expressionist paintings of the 1950s — come to mind when I see Henry Taylor's paintings. Figures and objects jostle in the same spatial plane, giving the illusion of compressed space. This effect of spatial tension enhances Taylor's point of view about urban communities and the people who inhabit them.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's oil paintings recall 18th and 19th century Western portrait paintings — dark colored background, full-length figure, layering of color to affect light and form, and fluid brushwork. However Yiadom-Boakye's prosaic "portraits" are fictional composites of people she has met or observed, each displaying a casual indulgence and self-awareness that is enigmatic and disarming as in *11 pm Friday* (2010). Devoid of any meaningful clues surrounding each figure, we are left to form our own narrative, which reveals as much about ourselves as that which we infer about the figure depicted.

Portraits may be unflinchingly realistic. LaToya Ruby Frazier's black-and-white photographs of her family in *The Notion of*

Family: Family Work (2002–2009) or herself in *The Homebody Series* (2010) verge on excess — "too real, too painful," as one critic wrote. Not polemical, they exude a raw honesty that alters the connotation of 'family' and provides vivid insight about institutional failure and personal vulnerability. And yet this photographic compendium documents an unwavering familial bond and individual steeliness.

Jefferson Pinder's signature medium is video, often showing him in some type of physical exertion, a metaphor about struggle being needed to achieve one's goal. His videos and performances are personal commentaries about racism, freedom, survival, transcendence, perseverance and disenfranchisement as in *K-Street Installation — Gate Keepers* (2010). History, popular culture and theater fuse in succinct performances about black culture and history as in *The Escape Artist* (2011–12) which refers to the 1931 lynching of Matthew Williams in a straightjacket in Salisbury, Md. Pinder adeptly samples different cultures and media to make insightful critiques of modern and contemporary society as shown in *Afro-Cosmonaut/Alien (White Noise)* (2008). The plot is the classical myth of Icarus enacted as Butoh theater. The backdrop is a film of NASA rocket launches, while an audio of Civil Rights oration and NASA Flight Control plays. The symbolic rise and fall of a black man becomes a post-modernist critique of the Civil Rights Movement and mainstream U.S. society.

These and other contemporary works reproduced in the collecting section of this issue show that artists of the 21st century African Diaspora are a part of a generation of artists who are not conceptually and intellectually moored to a specific place or locale. Born in United States, Western Europe or Africa, residing in U.S., Europe, Africa and Asia (sometimes with multi-residences), they see the world as their 'home' and



Toyin Odutola
Uncertain, yet Reserved. (Adeola, Abuja Airport, Nigeria), 2012
pen ink and acrylic ink on board
20 x 30"

Courtesy of the artist and the Jack Shainman Gallery



Henry Taylor
The Long Jump by Carl Lewis, 2010
 acrylic on canvas, 87 1/2 x 77"

Courtesy the artist and Untitled, New York. © 2011 Henry Taylor. On view at MoMA PS1 January 29–April 09, 2012.

have discovered that others share similar social and economic grievances and individual aspirations.

Unquestionably each artist's experiences infuse his or her work with a particular perspective of racial consciousness. But to categorize their work as African American art, as if there is a unifying unique aesthetic, is a disservice to how they view themselves and what their work reflects.

The collectors, who own works by the artists mentioned here, share a vision that the African Diaspora has and will invigorate

contemporary visual arts and enhance the international art scene. Such collectors are audacious. And the venture is most rewarding — acquiring work by an artist of the African Diaspora. Collector and artist are mutually expanding their aesthetic horizon for the benefit of all of us.

Sharon F. Patton, Ph.D., is an art historian and former director of the National Museum of African Art and the Allen Memorial Museum at Oberlin College.

AFRICA IS A COUNTRY.COM

Redefining “Blackness”: An interview with Toyin Odutola

DECEMBER 18, 2012 BY [ZACHARY ROSEN](#)



The richly layered portraits of Nigerian-American artist Toyin Odutola have been on the Africa is a Country radar for quite some time. Painstakingly created with marker and ballpoint pen, Toyin’s drawings have been making waves in the art world and across social media platforms. Aesthetically striking in their own right, Toyin’s unique style sparks important questions about the concept of identity. Her pieces tempt us to wonder about the identities that society projects onto us and more reflectively, how we have been sculpted by time into who we are at any given moment.

2012 has been an important year for Toyin’s progression as an artist. She received her MFA from California College of the Arts, published her first book of drawings — *Alphabet*, completed two residencies, including one at the legendary [Tamarind Institute](#) and exhibited works in numerous group shows including the “*Fore*” exhibition which is currently running at the Studio Museum in Harlem until March 10, 2013. With a major solo exhibition lined up at the Jack Shainman Gallery in April, the year 2013 is poised to be quite notable for Toyin as well.

We spoke with Toyin about her thoughts on post-racial aesthetics, perceptions of “African” art, androgynous figures and the nostalgic crystallization of past selves through portraiture.

Your predominant style of drawing involves creating a figure with many layers of ink, do the layers contribute to the mapping of the skin’s geography?

Absolutely, in the sense that the process of making layering, is, in essence, geography. I think a lot of people look at my style and they think it’s a means to an end, but honestly it’s the only factor. I think about what other people read in the work and it’s interesting, they find other things that they like, but for me it’s

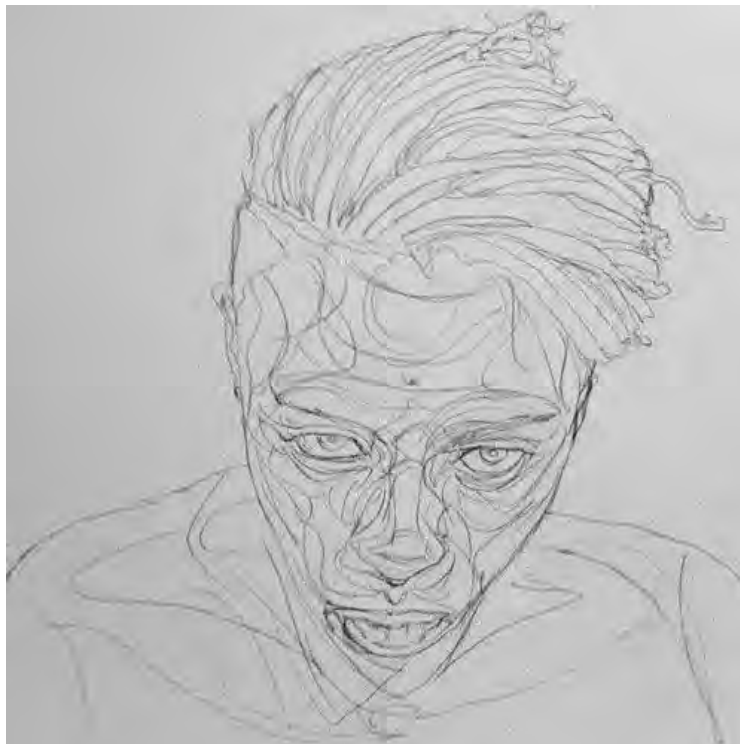
always been the skin. The skin is the most interesting thing. And it's the reason I go into it as hard as I do. Many people will say "I really like the eyes," or "I really like how you draw the hair," but to me that's embellishment for the skin. It all boils down to the skin. The whole geography of skin thing has kind of shifted I guess, with color — the sort of color pieces that I'm working on — because I think people are seeing that the language is expanding. So for them it's like, well, are you trying to create a whole new geography, an imagined geography, as opposed to something that's a little bit more personal to the subject or grounded to reality in any way. I never really was grounded to reality, at all. My work doesn't look like anything in the real world. So for me it's always been an abstraction — but it's an abstraction that is the lie that creates the reality. In the abstraction something real comes forth.

From some of your earlier interviews and then through your book, the way you actually talk about the skin and blackness has evolved and shifted.

I definitely sense that, but I'm also a bit nervous about it, because when I started this whole thing — around 2009 — it was just a means of making me not go crazy, honestly. It was so immersive and I could just lose myself in the meditative form of repetitive archs and puzzle-like form that I would never pay attention to the fact I was homeless and I had no job and I was really depressed. From that really dark place, I gained sort of a thing. For me every time I see the transition I remember that dark place because it was the reason I started.

Discovering and finding comfort in your own identity is a major theme of your book *Alphabet*, how has your art evolved as your conception of your identity has evolved?

Alphabet was my thesis. The way you present a thesis in my school ([CCA](#)) is that you have to talk about everything that your work is about. The program was really immersive and so they wanted you to provide a thorough context for your work. *Alphabet* became an Oprah Winfrey session, where I just poured out everything and *Alphabet*, the book, was a much-abridged version of that. It was both cathartic and nice to get it published, like a form, and say: this is my life. On the one hand, I'm this black woman artist, but on the other hand I come from a very specific identity and a very specific string of events. Some of it is recognizable to people and some of it is not. *Alphabet* was a shift happening in me and I wanted to record it, and I did, and my work has changed with it.



Often in popular discourse, the term “African” is not simply a geographical descriptor, it comes with cultural projections, As a Nigerian-American artist, to what extent is your artwork labeled “African” and how appropriate do you find that branding?

I’m proud that it’s called “African”. And I’ll say that without having an illusion of what Africa is tied onto. Because my work and many works like it are whistleblowers to the illusion of Africa. I think there’s this idea that African artists have this soulfulness that is inherent in the continent and create these grand narratives. But what I’m doing is, literally, drawing people. In a very basic way. With a pen. And that sort of resourcefulness is very African I think. Because you take something that seems very rudimentary, and you really go ham on. That might be something that is distinctly African. On the other hand, I’m specific to being Nigerian, so when I hear “African” it just seems like they’re lumping me into something immediately and not taking the time to research me. It’s annoying because whenever people talk about art history they just talk about Europe; so when you hear artists say “I’m a European artist” people are like “Okay, but say you’re Italian.” They take the time to be specific with Europeans so why can’t they take the time to be specific with me? It just seems kind of lazy.

Sometimes it is a good tag. Sometimes it is not. It’s a love-hate thing. So, again, whenever I hear “African” I don’t really know how to respond to it. I feel very proud to be a part of something that up to this point has been used very negatively; something that has been excluded or omitted in the art world. So it’s really nice to be someone who comes from that continent and says, “Hey I have a voice and you better listen because I have a right to it.” On the other hand it’s getting old because it’s 2012 and people still don’t know where Nigeria is located. It’s always going to be a struggle, probably for the rest of our lives, sadly. Maybe when I’m 40 people will be like, “I totally know where Nigeria is, I totally know about this culture.” The way that they know about France.

As a follow up to that, what do you think when some exhibitions are curated as a collection of “African” artists and they box you in to being an “African” artist as opposed to being a simply an artist?

I just returned from a show of African-American artists [[“Fore”](#)] and that was really interesting. I think that was the first time in New York where I was with some high class African-American people. A majority. It’s fascinating to me because we need those things. That’s the sad thing. It’s because of our society that we need those exhibitions, even though they’re something of a double-edged sword in their own way: they’re limiting us to a very specific way of seeing the world — but what they’re aiming to do is bring that specificity for people to come in and they see our universe. But how many people are going to go in without some kind of preconceived notion?

I think whenever anyone lumps me into an African genre, again I’m proud to be in that show, I’m happy that that show even exists, but I don’t want it just to be black people coming to the show, or only Africans. Yes my work deals with that subject matter, but that doesn’t mean you can’t come and see it if you are Asian, Latino or Caucasian. It doesn’t matter to me. It’s the fact that you’re even allowing the time to investigate my work. That is why that African show is needed — often times a lot of black artists aren’t included in shows, unless you’re a super mega artist. If you’re an emerging artist, you need that kind of exposure early on in your career. Not everyone is [Kara Walker](#) or [Glenn Ligon](#), for whom it of course also took a while to be who they are. I mean [Julie Mehretu](#) took a minute to be Julie Mehretu and she wasn’t even dealing with representational work. It is what it is.



Your works often explore elements of “blackness”, though your portraits depict people with a variety of cultural backgrounds; do you consider the redefinition of “blackness” in your work to be post-racial?

Oooh. That’s such a dirty and weird word, “post-racial”. Thelma Golden is the one who started the idea of post-racial in the 90’s. I don’t think we’re post-racial, ever, until people stop thinking about race. Which is not possible. One of the things that I like about [Hank Willis Thomas](#) — the air I breathe — is that he is such a genius in undermining the ridiculousness of race. I posted [a video](#) where he boils it down, he says, “[race] has been the most successful marketing ploy in the history of the world.” I just love that. And it’s totally true. Because everything that we think about another race is false. It’s completely false. The whole thing about blackness for me is that I wanted to make the work as dark as possible when I started because I’m a dark person and I wanted to capture what it feels like to be black. And then it just evolved. I started thinking, what if I draw [this Asian guy](#) as dark as possible...what does he become? Does he become black because I draw it or because they think he’s black? I even did his hair the way he has it. And still people will be like, “Oh. What is she trying to say?” And I’m like, “No, it’s an Asian guy that I just drew this way.” Suddenly it’s about my experience and my blackness and it’s not about him at all anymore and that’s a really fascinating process for me to digest. I’m the devil’s advocate when it comes to blackness. It’s always going to fascinate me because I’ve been treated a certain way since I was a child because of my blackness, which has been imposed on me. So for me to explore that in my work is to question why I was treated this way and how people read other people.

To me the interesting thing about blackness now is the pen. When you see a black pen, it’s not black at all. I love the moment when people see my work in person and they’re like, “Oh, but it’s not really black?” Taadaa! That’s why I use pen. Because it’s not black. The ink is not black.

These days, if you draw a black figure, because you’re coming from a place where you’ve tried to understand blackness as a concept, are you drawing that figure with a narrative of blackness or is it simply to say this is a person and we don’t have to deconstruct a racial message?

Blackness was a concept in my earlier work. It didn’t have to do with the person, it had to do with the concept of blackness, literally, because I wouldn’t even give them names. I would call them “female this” or “boy that”. I didn’t really think about people until 2011. It was just: here’s a person who is black. And black in

itself is twisted, because that is a material description. So before, I was definitely aware of the history of blackness in aesthetics, especially representational aesthetics. When you're doing portraiture and you're a black person and you're portraying black figures, there's always going to be a loaded history. I had to go through that to get where I am now, which is a very freeing place, where the black figures that I make can be various. The work isn't limited to that history anymore. And I think it has to do with the time that we're in. People are more free to be themselves and they're black, whereas before you had to represent blackness so much and you had to sacrifice a little bit of yourself to do that. Now it's more like I want to be me and me can be all of these things at once and have nothing to do with black social representation at all.

I actually am a super formalist — a dirty word in art school. No one wants you to be a formalist, you have to have a message. I look at [Lucian Freud](#) because he really was the embodiment of his craft being the message. The time it took, the labor, the way of looking at a person, that was the message. Because he drew predominantly white people so no one really assumed anything else. Take [Elizabeth Peyton](#) for example. The thing that really infuriates me is that I can't be an Elizabeth Peyton: painting and drawing people in my life, who aren't famous and who have no significance besides my connection to them, but I draw them in this way where I'm full-on adorning these people and all the public has to do is digest them as pretty. Peyton's gotten a little more political recently doing portraits of Kanye West, but of course black people, they're always political. That's when her message shifted. I think for me the moment I came out to do the work it was considered political, because it's the idea of seeing black men, black women, androgynous figures overall, being presented in this way was very different so of course I'm going to have to push a message with everything. But in the end I just want everybody to think "That's a really pretty blue." "I like that lash right there." Because that's what I see. I see the lashes, I see the fine points, but no one wants to focus on that because it trivializes a bigger issue and I understand that. The bigger issue is that we still have issues of representation in this country and that's a fucking big problem. Sometimes it's very frustrating to be an artist in that arena and you're like, "I don't want to always have to represent everyone." But at the same time I have to, because no one else will. It's the great burden of post-racial artists.



Do you think in your lifetime you'll be able to get to a place where you'll be able to transcend race with your art?

If you look at black history, especially women artists, usually the moment when they get famous for being what I'm seeking out is the moment they die. Think Zora Neale Hurston or Josephine Baker, women who

were very specific about not looking just at race, just at social representation, but rather at the artform itself. Time had to shift. But then I think about people like Toni Morrison who in every essence created works where the foundation has been about blackness and black representation, but she's transcended it completely. And she's still alive and she's still kicking it, but when people think about Toni Morrison, what's the first thing they think about? "Mmm hmmm Negro Spiritual" [singing]. And she's more than that. So maybe when she passes away – and I don't wish that upon her – but chances are, that's when it's gonna shift. Same with brilliant luminaries like bell hooks and Octavia Butler. I don't know, maybe in my lifetime...I'm not holding my breath though.

Many of your drawings are self-portraits, what drives you to capture many different variations of your own image?

There's a Romare Bearden quote that [I posted on my website](#) where he talks about how it's always difficult to draw yourself because you're always at issue, you're always changing, especially if you're an artist because you see everything. Observing yourself is very uncomfortable and you're more attuned to a shift. It's very difficult to draw yourself and think that's it. A mirror isn't the only form that can capture you, you can do it in so many different ways. [Noah Kalina](#), the guy who takes his photograph everyday, is a brilliant example of that. The idea that you're always at issue, you're always changing even when you look exactly the same, with the exact same face, everything is shifting. I draw myself because I want to capture a shift. That's why I always get tattoos, they're temporal, they represent a time that's passed. It's a moment to take a break and look at myself properly. It's not just how I look, it's what has happened. As James Baldwin says, "Where I've been and what I've been."

The reason I started doing self portraits in the first place was to see myself. Not just in a mirror or in a photo, To really take the time and look. Through that I'm getting at the psychology of looking, I'm really getting at what I was thinking, what I was feeling. There are moments when I think, "Oh my god I hate my face," but I also have moments where I think — and it sounds totally narcissistic and it's not meant to be — "I have a really interesting face." It's the same reason why I'll draw my brothers 'til the day I die, because they have the most interesting faces. Especially my youngest brother. He's 6'7" and he's got these huge eyes and he's always looking at me with this look of incredulity. He's like "Really?" I love that. He has so many variations of that "really?" He can do "really?" from the back. He can do "really?" from the side. He can do "really?" looking up.

You were born in Ife, Nigeria, but you have lived much of your life in California and Alabama, all very different cultural environments. How has this plural cultural experience shaped your artwork?

It's helped in color. It's helped in tone. It's helped in creating puzzle-like forms. I always go back to memory when I work. For me it's constant. They're not even places I have lived in the past tense, they're always relived in a way. I'm still there and they're still shaping me.

Your drawings portray people not only as they are, but often as they were at some previous time; is there a certain nostalgia captured in your pieces for the selves of moments passed?

It's all nostalgia. It's all about time. The reason why I'm always obsessed with capturing myself is because I know I'm never going to be that way ever again. There's this piece I did called [All these garlands prove nothing](#) (2012), which I made when I had super long hair. That piece got damaged in Hurricane Sandy and I was really bummed about it. It wasn't the only one that got damaged, but it was the one that was hit the most. There's a lot of emotion involved with the series I'm working on now. It's the idea of literally something lost and what you do in response to that. So I started drawing all the hairstyles I've ever had. Which are a lot actually. I had this punk thing, I had an afro, I had long hair. You'd think I was schizophrenic, but it really was just me trying to discover myself and figure out what I can get away with. While I'm working on this piece, even though I'm spending a lot of time on the details, I'm aware that people are not going to see that or it has the potential to be gone. All that time I spent doesn't matter anymore. The piece doesn't exist in that same way again. That was a big wake up call recently. The amount of time I spend on my work and what it really means. Does the time spent equal the time that's lost?



Some of the figures in your drawings appear androgynous, is there a message about gender that you are trying to convey through such pieces?

I am a huge fan of androgyny. I think more people should be androgynous in portrayals. I embrace the masculine and feminine side of myself and I like to explore that in my drawings. When I draw my brothers in particular, I exploit the feminine. I always give them huge lashes and I always capture them in poses that are not quintessential black male poses. There's one piece that's based on a photo I took at the Abuja airport, which is absolute chaos, where my brother's head is cocked up and there's a tinge of terror in his eyes. He was trying so hard to be this calm, cool black dude. I loved that. I called the piece *Uncertain yet Reserved* (2012) because he was reserving everything. He was trying so hard to hold onto his blackness, his maleness, but he was very scared and neither of us knew what was going on. It's the slight sense of uncertainty where his eyes are wavering. I love that kind of portrayal. The whole point of exploiting that gender construct is to get at the person and not get at the label that society wants to put on them. It's all about the social construct of an identity and the reality of a person, which are very different things.

I've always been someone who's been very androgynous. I'm glad I'm a woman. I love being a woman, but I'm also aware that I have very masculine sides to me. That's something for black women that you don't see a lot.

You are a prolific blogger and instagram user, documenting your artistic process and your musings, does interacting with your audience impact your pieces?

I remember when [blogging] was a really weird thing I did on my own and I had ten friends. It was really personal. It was me. I would go back and I would say, "What did I do with that piece again?" and I would literally go back into my archive and I would look it up and watch the different stages because I was so obsessive about documenting everything. I would watch how I had constructed it. No one else gets it but I do so I would look at those pictures and think, "I got it. I know how I did that piece, now I'm going to apply it to this one." But then suddenly the audience also got involved. There would be questions and it turned into a dialogue. Back then it was a beautiful moment where there were these very cerebral questions that really made me take a step back. I often came up with rather long answers, but it was because I was thinking. What those questions did for me was provide questions for my thesis. Which is what Alphabet is about. That's why I wanted to publish it — because it started on the blog. If I hadn't had those questions I don't

think I would be eloquent enough to talk about my work. [Dominick Brady](#) would ask questions, and so would [Derica Shields](#) — people like that who were thinking as they were seeing my work. I received really hard-hitting questions where it took me three days to respond to. Now I get the questions where someone asks, “How do you figure out your color palette?” I want to say, “Figure it out yourself!” I’m not going to answer everything. There’s a lot of really young people that follow my blog now and I totally get that because when I was 17 I was also wondering, “What oil medium does Lucian Freud use? Does he use linseed oil? Oh my god.” Can you imagine if Lucian Freud had a blog? I would kill him with questions. Every time I get annoyed with questions I imagine Picasso having a Tumblr, I’m sure people would ask him the same thing. Or Matisse.

On your blog Obia the Third, you often share quotes that resonate with you from the likes of Zadie Smith and Virginia Woolf. How does literature inform your artwork?

Well, it’s really great for titles. I’ve always loved reading ever since I was a kid. I remember the first time I read a Zadie Smith book, who I adore. I think she’s the female literary equivalent of me as an artist because she’s always questioning herself and that’s something I do when I work. I love to read interviews with her equally as much as I love to read her books because they are such brilliant windows into her world. Same with James Baldwin. [Interviews with James Baldwin](#) are the Holy Grail. He’s so on it, he’s so aware. I’ve read *Another Country* 50 billion times.

We live in a world where we’re so inundated with visual language that people think they know what they’re seeing when they don’t. So you need literature to hone it into something very specific. I’ve noticed many times when I leave my pieces untitled, peoples’ imaginations will run crazy. So it’s about taking control of what I’m making and getting to a point where I’d like the audience to start from instead of just having them start from wherever they feel like. If you look at any major artist, they have to write something. We can’t just leave it at the art alone anymore. You have to write so you have to know what good literature is. My style is very much a reflection of people I read. Literature allows me to properly talk about my work. If I were ever to meet any of these people I think I would probably cry. I’m terrified too, because I would probably get a restraining order on myself.

But here’s a question, how accessible should writers and artists be? I always question that, especially with my blog. How much is too much? I’m getting to that point where I’m thinking I need to take a break because people start thinking you owe them something. No artist owes you anything. So how accessible do I want to be and how much mystery do I want to keep? I used think mystery was bad for a very long time. I thought I had to be as transparent as possible. And now I’m like, “No, I need to protect myself.” I’ve had a couple shows where people come up and they touch me. And I understand that because I was always someone who was a fan. But now someone is a fan of me, which I find incredibly crazy because I’m a crazy person. Online life and real life interaction is very different for me. If someone is going to message me online, there can be this tone of authority. That’s where I feel the access stops. But if you come up to me in person and you say you just want to talk to me for like 5 minutes, I’ll talk to you. Online it feeds into the fantasy of what I am, but if you talk to me in person you get to see that I’m just me and that I’m awkward and silly.



You've mentioned Hank Willis Thomas, Kara Walker, Kerry James Marshall, Lucian Freud and Korehiko Hino among the artists you admire. Who would you most like to collaborate with?

Hank is N°1 because he's such a good collaborator. He's the collaborator king. [Kerry James Marshall](#) too, but I'd be so terrified I probably would end up doing nothing, I'd just watch him the whole time. For a lot of these people I would just want to be in the same studio working with them, but not necessarily literally collaborating. I would love to meet [Takehiko Inoue](#), the guy who did that *Vagabond* series that I love so much. I just want to be in his studio drawing with him. His energy to me is so inspiring. If you see him work he's like a machine. He's making these huge pieces. He's the only reason that I think I have a possibility of doing large work because he's doing ridiculous detail.

Hank Willis Thomas has been a part of your career from early on and has facilitated your development as an artist, he clearly digs your work, so what is preventing the Hank-Toyin collaboration from actually happening?

I feel like he's just so busy, but it's probably gonna happen. Knowing Hank, something's gonna come up. The reason I studied at CCA was because of him. He graduated from that school and I thought if this guy went there and was able to make that kind of work, I am in. He's the reason I'm even having this interview. I joke around a lot, but I owe him so much. He's been so supportive. He's the kind of person that you would want as a mentor because he's honest, he just tells it as it is. In the art world, no one can prepare you for this craziness. It's so nice to have someone to help you navigate because it is treacherous.

So someday. I hope so. Put it on blast. Say, Hank, I'm ready to collaborate.

You have a solo exhibition scheduled for April 2013 at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City, is there a theme that unifies the pieces you will show at that installation?

I'm trying. I'm all over the place because my interests have been all over the place. Ok, I'll give you an Africa is a Country exclusive. Amber. That's all I'm going to say. Every bit of the definition of amber is what I'm really interested in right now. And it's been making sense for the color choices I've been making recently in the last few months. But it's really hard for me to bring pieces together for a show. Even for [my previous show] MAPS it was like two separate shows. There was a lot of older work and then there was a lot of this new sequential work. At the end of the day it's probably going to be that way. Two ways of seeing will

definitely play into it. I have the whole gallery this time, which terrifies me. I'm excited, but I'm also dreading it a little bit because I really don't know what people are thinking. At all.

There are a lot of people saying I should do a life-sized portrait. I've done full body before. For me whenever I introduce naked bodies it's a whole other conversation. Do I want to have that conversation? I've had people be annoyed that I don't do full bodies and I just say, "Trust me. There's a reason I don't do naked bodies." I did it before and people think, "Oh my god those are her boobs!" First thing. And then of course it becomes this thing about slavery. People say I'm commentating on that, which I never am. I might do one and make it really uncomfortable for people. Something really inappropriate. And maybe then they will get off my back. But they'll probably want more. They'll say, "Why don't you do 5 more of those pieces?" The full body thing is interesting in the sense of doing something like Laylah Ali's *Greenheads*; something that deals with a narrative. If I present a naked body, it's going to be a group of them doing something. And I don't want it to be referring to some classical arrangement, I want it to be its own story, in its own world. And that takes time and planning and you really have to know what you want to do ahead of time, which I never do. So it's not something that's out of my purview.

In the letter A in *Alphabet* you describe the people you've been during your lifetime; who are you at this very moment?

Still trying to figure that out. I'd say I'm very indecisive. Unsatisfied. A completely self-indulgent draftsman who came back to the South because she needs to find grounding at a crazy crazy time. Someone who's questioning her very image and the mythology around people more than ever.



Toyin was born in Ife, Nigeria and raised largely in Alabama. Her self-published book *Alphabet* is available [here](#). Find Toyin on [Tumblr](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#). As a tribute to the manner in which Toyin methodically documents her artwork on her [blog](#), the images above illustrate the progression of how her portraits come to life. Some excerpts from the video interview can be found [on YouTube](#).

The New York Times

Museum and Gallery Listings for June 17-23

Published: June 16, 2011

Art

★ **Toyin Odutola: 'Maps'** (through June 25) Using ballpoint pens and other drawing utensils, this young artist, born in Nigeria and living in San Francisco, makes a polished New York solo debut with small portraits. Each one, derived from photographs of friends but incorporating Ms. Odutola's features, looks to have been weaved from strips of dark, ductile, sinewy material, then finished with hair-fine details. Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street , (212) 645-1701, jackshainman.com. (Cotter)

<http://www.vogue.it/en/vogue-black>



It must be every artists dream, that whilst obsessing over a piece of work in the studio some magic is taking place in the outside world that lands you a gallerist and a sold out show in New York.

For **Toyin Odutola**, her dream came true, one year in to graduate school at California College of the arts the Nigerian born artist can barely contain her excitement. Between breathless giggles she describes how a coping mechanism (drawing) became a tool for change and possibly a way to put her name on the map.

"I moved around a lot when I was a child, two of the houses I grew up in have totally disappeared. One was burnt in a

riot, and the other was pulled down." **This sense of instability inspired the Nigerian artist to start drawing aged nine.** "I needed to create something I could take with me wherever I went." What started out as little doodles **have become bold expressions of work that have had an overwhelming reaction.**

Odutola's gallerist **Jack Shainman** describes the artists work as detailed and almost obsessive, but beyond the appearance of the work the artist is making firm declarations. Odutola says that **her work is an exploration of self.** " I kept wanting to push my image as validity, I wanted to see my portrait on a wall and know it was okay." Fans claim to see themselves in Odutola's work, they see a deep resemblance, and they ask the same questions the artist herself: Do you see me? and Can I just exist now? The answers lie in Odutola's work as continues the quest, **hunched over her canvas, pen in hand creating bodies of work that speak to the world.**

Toyin's work is exhibited at the Jack Shainman Gallery until June 25th.

BY Yomi Abiola

Published:

06/09/2011

Interview with artist Toyin Odutola

blog | 30 May 2011 | By [Natascha Chtena](#)



Just before the opening of [Toyin Odutola's first solo show at Jack Shainman Gallery](#) in New York, I had an extended and unusually honest chat with the young artist, discussing the 'anatomy' of her technique, perceptions of 'Blackness', politics of identity and artistic convergence amongst many, many things. And behind the "hottest young African import" to the US, I discovered an artist that is painfully aware of every aspect, every second of her creative process.

How does it feel having your first solo show in New York?

I am ecstatic! Sure, there's a multitude of adjectives that come to mind, but nothing truly captures the pride, nervousness and excitement that is consuming me at this moment. I am eternally grateful to my family and friends for helping me reach this point. It's an amazing opportunity.

How is living in California different compared to living in Nigeria?

California is a bit of a strange entity. It encompasses the mythology of the vast, open West: full of infinite possibility, otherworldliness, the unknown frontier; yet, it's choc-full of welcoming pocket communities of the most esoteric kind. Truth be told, grad school requires a considerable amount of concentration and a slowness that is difficult to jump into if too distracted by one's environs. In San Francisco, there's just the right amount of hustle and bustle with a settled calm of a small town. You feel comforted, and yet, you also feel the need to push yourself, to test the waters within a sort of laboratory that is a very peculiar city.

Do you miss home, do you see yourself going back?

The last time I visited Nigeria was back in 2001. It's an incredibly beautiful and vibrant country, full of various textures and tones in the human landscape exemplified through skin, culture, language and history—all of which have been inspiring to my work. Lately, I feel a distance. I do miss it. Being in a sort of limbo state, I identify very much as a Nigerian American, but my birthplace, family heritage and genealogy all harken back to Nigeria. It's a strange place to be in: belonging and not quite belonging, always balancing one's personal affiliations. Also, being of both Yoruba and Igbo decent makes me sort of an anomaly in the Nigerian community, which only adds to my personal feelings of displacement. In any case, I would very much like to visit; I'd planned on doing so this summer, however my plans fell through.

Are you at all in touch with the arts scene in Nigeria? Could you tell us a bit about it?

Sadly, not so much. I've just started scratching the surface, from the little bits of information I've acquired. I've only recently discovered El Anatsui's work, as well as the Center for Contemporary Art in Lagos. From those two discoveries I've been exposed to a plethora of artists and movements unbeknownst to me before, and it's incredibly inspiring! It certainly makes me seriously consider the possibility of working in Nigeria at some point in the future.

How did your parents “react” to your talent and how do they comment on your work now?

There's a commonly cited joke on the reactions Nigerian parents will display upon the discovery that their child intends on pursuing the arts. It's a terrifying notion to them: uncontrollable laughter, flailing arms, screams of agony, tears of failure and resentment, profuse kneeling at the altar and deeply reverberating prayers and songs are exerted. The idea that their son or daughter is willing to take a risk for the entirety of their adult career, as in to voluntarily sacrifice certainty for the sake of art-making, is a foreign concept to parents who have worked so hard to prevent their children from ever being in too precarious a situation financially.

So they don't approve of the artist lifestyle for their daughter?

I remember the first time I mentioned the very idea of it to my parents and was immediately met with a scoff and a near fainting incident. But I persisted; and I must say, compared to other Nigerian parents in the small town I grew up, mine were by far more supportive and tolerable of my explorations into this field than my fellow Nigerian mates, I think. My parents invested in my inclination, my need to keep at it—much to their chagrin at first—but eventually, it all paid off (at least, I hope that is what they think). Nowadays, they seem exuberant. They are very open to my being an artist and supported my grad school aspirations with pleasure. It's a gift really, for I know how difficult it must have been for them to throw caution to the wind hoping, in the end, it would all be for the best. Concerning my “lifestyle”, they accept me as is and love me regardless of what I do or whom I appear to be, which is very refreshing.

How long did it take you before you “settled” on the technique and aesthetic you are now employing?

The beginnings of this style came about in 2004 as an inquisition—playing with the planes of the human form, namely through the rendering of skin. It was my response to a Figure Drawing assignment I had to tackle during my undergrad foundation studies. Since then, I've been enamored with this idea of analyzing the skin in the form of landscapes and scarification. Every detail of information, on and of the skin, is abstracted and manipulated in a way that renders it recognizable yet foreign. In many ways, this style is an exploration of the limits as well as the possibilities of contradiction; the ability to transfer experiential geography onto a person, it never fails to excite me.

Could you elaborate on that?

I've gradually adjusted the style in time to a smother surface, a more seductive presentation from the harsher more graphic drawings of its beginnings. Although the style is still quite graphic, I'm far more interested in how it has become a sort of specified visual language I've created for myself. No longer am I too concerned with my subjects being directly recognizable in any sort of...anatomically accurate way; nor am I too concerned with stringently comparing and/or contrasting it to the expansive visual language the history of Pan-African representative portraiture has to offer, which obviously greatly influences the work.

But with what?

Currently, I'm more engaged with where the style begins to transcend one's notions of skin and placement. If someone is rendered in a way that is fundamentally dermal and experiential, but somehow separate, it leaves a space for one to implant his/her ideas of belonging and not belonging, possession and freedom from it. Formally, I am very settled on a sort of minimalist presentation (pertaining to the subject/ground relationship). Although most of the action takes place on the skin itself, the aesthetic exposes how the subject interacts within a decontextualized space. The actions which the subject partakes in (as in this “terrain of one's being”) is contrasted by the un-colonized space she inhabits and explores. This binary tension is exploited in the obsessively layered mark-making employed. In the end, what I hope to reveal is that the territory being explored is the

subject herself, not the imposed context surrounding them, and what it means to explore the geography of a stranger and find yourself hidden within that person.

Have you ever tried working with color?

I go in and out. For a while I worked very extensively with color. Around 2009, I took a more “monochromatic” turn, if you will. The irony of my works being labeled (and edited by myself considerably) as monochromatic, is the material qualities lending itself otherwise. Working mainly with pen ink, one is acutely aware of how susceptible to light it is. Regardless of whether I am working in black pen ink or some other color tone, the light will always reveal it as a rusty, copper-tone. I find this “surprise” element incredibly seductive, which has led me to apply the mark even deeper, darker and more solidly (as in heavily), to really get at capturing the darkness and the light simultaneously.

What drew you away from it and what role does the monochrome (black & white) play in your work?

All the attributes that lend to the beauty of a polychromatic surface are also the very detractors which cause formal problems in my skin explorations. The main obstacle being the agitated clashing of harsh color with detailed texture. With the heavily considered mark, texture is paramount to me. So, when I do introduce color into the language of this mark, it generally distracts from the geography I wish the viewer's eye to explore undeterred. Although, one of the pieces in (MAPS) utilizes color, in order for the image to work the way I wished, I had to use it sparingly.

The turn towards a monochromatic aesthetic was economical. I wanted to minimize the image to its essential impact—that of creating a space for the skin to speak for itself, and not the context of the subject's skin. This is a double-edged sword approach: in my desire to create subjects that are more than simply Black figures, I render them so graphically with detail that one cannot help but to be consumed by their Blackness. This is meant to be the initial impression, which I hope compels the viewer to investigate the subject further. In so doing, the silhouetted figures' narratives expand and suddenly a whole new experience is revealed.

Your subjects always face the viewer directly. Why is that?

I truly believe in the power of the penetrating gaze. From the beginning of my working with portraiture, I wanted the subjects I created to be active participants in staring as much as the viewer. The direct gaze, even subtly hinted at, hopefully allows for the subject to speak with equal intensity in a very base, humanistic way, as her skin speaks on a territorial level.

It's widely accepted that in art there is a huge, uncontrollable gap between (the artist's) intention and (the viewer's) interpretation. What do you nevertheless hope that you are mediating to your audience?

That is the question that wracks my brain constantly. It's a tricky, near impossible question to answer, really. I mean, in all honesty, the gap between intention and interpretation is where the magic happens, I suppose; it is where the second crucial stage of art-making commences. I could go into deeply personal convictions I have about the work, but that wouldn't much influence how an outsider feels when coming into contact with the work in person. I've had scores of critiques in school where a myriad of responses to my work took place. Some were recognizable, as in somewhat parallel to my intentions for the work; however, for most of it, I was thoroughly surprised. That surprise has altered my own perceptions of the work and, at times, given me cause to seriously re-evaluate my process entirely. Either way, it is a crucial element to my development as an artist.

I assume, then, that you are a 'supporter' of the notion of public art?

Art is meant to be presented and open to a public forum, I suppose. I cannot deny the power of that kind of exposure, regardless of one's romantic notions of "art for arts sake." There is a need to make the work and it is very important that an artist know her impetus for working, for making, which is extremely important, but it is also essential for an artist to have a dialogue with the people and the times in which she exists. This took me quite some time to adjust to and swallow. I use to be very stubborn about the work being exposed in such a way. I held on tightly to Herbert Marcuse's idea of the artists being within her time and yet always separate. To create a classic, one must not always be in agreement or parallel with the time in which she exists. Nowadays, I see how I completely misread this ideology. I was so intent on having me as my artwork's main audience, its main judge. I later realized how wrong I was and how selfish and naïve such an notion sounded.

Whatever ideas I may have or choose to mediate to the viewer will be dependent on his/her interpretation. I cannot change that fact. Truthfully, I mustn't downplay the importance of my making the work and having it exist as an object in this world a la "for the sake of the work." However, I'm trying not to limit it to an idea in my head. The fact that I made it and it is a part of this world is a gift really and I should cherish it, but I shouldn't discount or run away from the life the work begins to have once it enters the arena of public consumption and discourse. Interesting things happen there and much can be learned from it. I'm slowly getting to understand that now.

There is no denial that your work is politically inclined. Do you think art can change the world?

Yes...and no. In a capitalistic system, creating objects which are a part of that system, inevitably, make it hard to pragmatically change the world. However, the beauty of art's purpose, I think, is when it can transform ideas which directly change how people enact laws, systems of commerce, etc. The strength of art lies in its capacity to evoke strong empathy. This can be utilized for good or ill, depending on who you ask. My work is political; again this is something that took me a while to adjust to. It's obvious to me now, the political angle of the work, but, for a while there, I was so intimately consumed with making the work, with creating these images which I felt needed to be created, I didn't

really stop and question how these works are perceived in the context of which they are being made. I make portraits that explore Blackness—as a conceptual, formal and decolonizing agent. This may sound rather naïve, but I began drawing in this heavily detailed and darkened style of mark-making because I wanted desperately to create images of subjects whom I could identify with—subjects who looked like how I felt about my skin, my selfhood. Essentially, I wanted to create the embodiment of what Blackness felt like to me. I wanted the blackest of the black to show full of light, not in contrast or comparison, but a lightness that is within, that is an inextricable part of it. I suppose what I'm trying to say is, I wanted to present a Black figure as something more than Other, something that is vulnerable yet dignified, strong as well as instantly fragile. I wanted to capture me: “I am not this narrative that has been written about me, flattened and archetypal, I am my own person, a land that I now wish to take back. Here, I will show you. Do not omit me or render me invisible to the night. I am here, I will not be erased or smudged out. I am as vast and wondrous as the night sky.” That sort of thing. And that is very political. To demand a presence, to demand a voice, a visibility and rights to a new sort of dialogue is something that has always been there, it just took me awhile to see it for myself.

I am honored when people tell me how much the work impacts them, how connected they feel to the narratives of my subjects and it truly is heartfelt and I am most appreciative. This work came from somewhere deep within me that is very personal and to see that it speaks to a stranger in an equally, if not more, personal way, is quite overwhelming and I am honored to share that connection. The politics of the work are multifaceted (dealing with agency of womanhood and the hybrid postcolonial female identity) in an indirect way, I think. However, there is much artwork in the world that is very direct, very inspiring and impactful. There are multiple ways to create change through art, some are more intimate and personal than others. I feel my work deals with the emphasis of the individual within an essentialist collective and how best to mold one's sense of place within that vast and flattened landscape. When there is a person who can be transported by my work—just one person—that is truly awe inspiring to me. That is change, to me.

What do you think is the greatest misconception people in the West have about Africa and about African artists?

Capitalism's push towards globalization has caused nomadic, flux states to become facts of living now. More and more migrations are taking place not only between Post-Colonial and Western nation states, but within these nation states at an alarming rate. I've read that just within US recent history, it used to be that a couple generations ago people were born in a specific local and remained there for most of their lives—living, working, contributing to that place. Nowadays, that is becoming increasingly rare. People are moving around more and, in so doing, an exchange begins to take place; a transmitting of cultures and information becomes the norm and multicultural spaces begin to form. This is very exciting for a number of reasons: 1) for it allows for more visibility of minority groups in otherwise less diverse or generally homogeneous communities; 2) it allows for mixture to occur, meshing culture, language, economies, politics and the arts, to name a few, which in turn create new, thriving identities; 3) it makes the most basic human

commonalities among us more visible. To be sure, there are bad sides to this as well. I think of a resonating excerpt from Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2001):

“But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, peanuts, compared to what the immigrant fears – dissolution, disappearance.”

This particular quote has haunted me for some time and has been my primary concern involving the misconceptions of Westernized views of Africa as a continent as well African artists specifically. There is a disappearance that happens when Africans travel across the oceans and seas into the West. We get lumped together, become a singular entity. The multitudes of identities, tongues, richness and variety, get clumped into a continental country. We are made into something Other, dark, mysterious and always, always foreign. Even in America, amongst the African American community, there is a discord, an impenetrable disconnect. It's incredibly frustrating. A Ghanian is not the same as a Somalian, nor is a Kenyan the same as a Zimbabwean. To quote another writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who brilliantly pin-pointed this problem of the Westernization of Africans in her essay, “The danger of a single story.” In it, she cuttingly illustrates this problem, which she presented in a TED lecture in 2009:

“Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my “tribal music,” and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning, pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa. A single story of catastrophe. In this single story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her, in any way. No possibility of feelings more complex than pity. No possibility of a connection as human equals. I must say that before I went to the U.S. I didn't consciously identify as African. But in the U.S. whenever Africa came up people turned to me. Never mind that I knew nothing about places like Namibia. But I did come to embrace this new identity. And in many ways I think of myself now as African. Although I still get quite irritable when Africa is referred to as a country. The most recent example being my otherwise wonderful flight from Lagos two days ago, in which there was an announcement on the Virgin flight about the charity work in 'India, Africa and other countries.'

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story, and to start with, “secondly.” Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.

All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience, and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar."

In sum, the beauty of the human landscape lies in the similarities we share as human beings more so than our distinct differences. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for us to not forget this fact, even though we get caught up in our specialized personas. As Adichie eloquently states, we are all made up of a variety of stories, each and every one of them integral to our selfhood and important to make known, to make visible. However, it is when we use this variety to separate ourselves, to create hierarchies and distance in when we create tragic circumstances for ourselves, no doubt world history has shown us. In this increasingly nomadic, flux state we are living, where everything novel and instantly enacted, to self-dislocate, seems like suicide. Sure, this all sounds very utopian in the insular, conglomerated systems in which we inhabit, but I believe it is this which contributes to the greatest misconceptions about Africans in the Western mindset: that we are one large and Other group of people who are somehow a part of the human landscape but always separate. Disappearance and reinvention of identities are fundamental processes of the human narrative; however, when only certain, very specific narratives overtake others and dominate—intentionally so through the use of power—that is when people get left behind and the human landscape, with all its variety and terrain to explore, appreciate, cultivate and share, becomes not simply more bland, but incomplete.

Where do you stand in regards to the relation between artwork and curatorial text? Do you believe that the one complements the other or rather that “good art” would not require the latter?

It depends, really. This goes back to the question I answered earlier about the need for an artist to have a public forum for her/his work, even if the audience may or may not agree with the work or see conceptually along the same lines as the artist's intentions. Supplementary text to works of art can be helpful as they can easily be detrimental. I, myself, find it very difficult to voice my work in any sort of literary way. Even to respond to these questions has taken days. I have to try and seriously consider how to translate a visual, non-finite language (and idea) with a literal one. It's a very strange process. But who I am to deny the brilliance of a keen critic or astute art historian who is able to partake in this translation. Whether the writer is spot on or not, the attempt is a triumph in and of itself, for it shows there is a possibility for artwork, which exists in a very ambiguous world, to be understood in another. If it works in the artist's favor? Wonderful! If not? At least they tried. Since commencing my studies in grad school, I've become increasingly suspicious of the phrase “good art.” I don't even know what that means anymore. Everything in this world is opinion based, nothing is really set in stone.

Give a person a few decades and some revised texts and lectures and you are studying an entirely new body of works.

What is it then that matters, if all is relative?

What seems to matter most is if the work resonates with a diverse group of people. The more universal the work proves itself to be, as opposed to being more esoteric and too stoically faithful to a specific time and place, the more likely it will be deemed a classic. There are aesthetic considerations, definitely, but that again can be reinterpreted and realigned with time and energy if the artist's work is deemed worthy of it. There are so many great works of art out there that we have never heard of and probably will never see. I used to fear that my work would fall under this category, so I applied to school and migrated to a center where I believed my work could reach a larger audience. I'd only hoped that with this new forum the work would find new life in the discourse and I've been very fortunate that it has. For a score of artists that doesn't happen. Whether or not their works will be accompanied with curatorial texts could bring them from the drudges of death to new life and beyond, inspiring a new generation of image-makers, is a beautiful story that only happens to a select few. Then again, there could be a well established work that can be brought down six-feet under with the slightest scribble of a writing pen or from the feverishappings of a keyboard. With the internet everything is becoming more egalitarian. Everyone is a curator now. So the texts seem to be less important and the image itself is taking more precedence. I don't know where this shift will lead, but I'm not discounting how exciting this time is. When the appreciation of art becomes more democratic, what happens with the elitist systems of separation? I don't mind reading the texts which accompany artworks, sometimes I seek them out. But the image is the image and in the end, it should, at the very least, be granted the opportunity to stand on its own..if only for a moment, to see if it can speak for itself.

You have mentioned how you see yourself as an intersection of a self-taught and formally trained artist. Do you think that quality-wise there is a difference between self-taught and formally educated artists?

Again, it's all relative. I mean, it's all personal opinion. I have a very specific aesthetic that I'm attracted to, I am drawn to a certain mode or taste. Whether these attractions are affected by my schooling or my own personal self-development as an artist is questionable. There are trained artists from very prestigious schools who make work that is aesthetically coined "outsider art" or akin to childish scribble, and there are self-taught artists who can beautiful craft a masterpiece on par technically with a David or a Botticelli. What annoys me is when schooling takes precedence over independent student and craft. What do we do as artists? Most of it is spent alone in a studio or whichever place we choose to work, honing our skills, experimenting, expanding our technical capabilities.

So you don't really believe in the concepts and methods of 'art school'?

I'm not discounting the importance of a guide, a professorial hand to help us through the process, however I cannot overlook the plethora of artists who make equally (if not more)

complex and engaging work that have never stepped foot in a foundational arts class. Creative impulse is the common string that drives us regardless of our training. I think when we get caught up in entitlement, whether self-taught or specifically trained, is when problems arise. If we get set with very specific movements and aesthetics, we lose touch with variety. Like the misconception of Africans question I answered earlier, it's a limitation and it is self-inflicted to only focus on artists who are only self-taught or on the opposing side, trained. In the end both groups are making work to be viewed to be appreciated and to ruminate on. One should not overtake the other. There is one thing that I feel is needed on both sides that I never thought of until recently, and that is the importance of reading about art. I know this is all very out of turn, especially after the response I gave just before. But I truly believe I have benefitted immensely from having access to philosophical and theory-based texts since commencing art school. It helps you understand the importance of the sources of your work. This goes back to the "art for art's sake" comment. It's all well and good to make work for the pure need to have it be made, I welcome that notion, however, one must understand why: Why are you making the work? Why is it important? Why is it important now? Why is it needed? Why does it matter? Then you can move on to the how and, in turn, the "what" comes more visible and understandable for the artist. So if the audience cannot understand the work, at the very least the artist can.

Who are your favorite artists?

There are so many! I am constantly inspired by the works of a number of artists. Namely, I have been consistently obsessed with the following: Glenn Ligon, Kerry James Marshall, Hank Willis Thomas, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Julie Mehretu, Roni Horn, Laylah Ali, Marlene Dumas, Amy Adler, Claudette Schreuders, Kara Walker, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Toba Khedoori, Barkley L. Hendricks, Kimsooja, Adrian Piper, Jeff Sonhouse, Mauricio Lasansky, Zhang Xiaogang, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Mark Bradford, Frida Kahlo (mainly her self portraits, not so much her dreamscapes), Robert Longo, Viviane Sassen, John Singer Sargent, and Egon Schiele.

If you could literally exhibit anywhere in the world (not even necessarily a museum/gallery), where would that be?

Japan. In a space that is meant for healing and exchange. Since I was very little, I've been utterly transfixed by Japanese culture. I really don't know where it all started or where exactly it stemmed from, but since then I've always had a soft spot for the country's unique history and people. Recent tragic events really brought that fact to me hard. If I had the opportunity to exhibit anywhere I would be honored to do so there, to help bridge a gap and create a connection. I'm not sure how I would ever do it, but if ever I was given the chance, I'd sure as hell try to make that a reality.

What do you plan on doing after you graduate?

Working in my studio. Wherever that will be is uncertain, but it needs to happen if I am to function.