

Where the art feels like home

For these creatives, heading back into their pasts has inspired some thrilling new work

Aimee Farrell | 11 November 2021



British artist Tunji Adeniyi-Jones © William Jess Laird

When the Brooklyn-based British artist Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, whose work typically explores his Nigerian heritage through dynamic figurative canvases, first moved to the States to study, his experiences largely served to highlight his Britishness rather than his blackness. His latest work is marked by a poignant return to London via Mexico City after his father died at the height of the pandemic.

“I’m used to being a nomad,” he says of the tragic journey to his hometown. “But this was extreme nomad. I was suddenly thrust into these new cultural spaces that were inspiring and informative, and left an undeniable imprint on my work.” Fashioning makeshift studios in his aunt’s London garage, and in various Mexican hotel rooms, he found a new kind of liberation and began producing loose sketches on paper, many of which form

the foundation of his current solo show Tunji Adeniyi-Jones: Astral Reflections at Charleston, East Sussex, until 13 March, 2022.



Twin Virtues in Blue & Orange, 2021, by Tunji Adeniyi-Jones © JSP Art Photography.

“It made the work much more elastic and versatile,” says Adeniyi-Jones of the series. “I became much more free to place my figures in a non-space that’s floral or abstract and colourful, but not specific to a time or a place.”

A seismic journey to Dakar in Senegal at the start of 2020 with the artist-in-residence programme Black Rock also proved significant. “A lot of my work up until this trip was tapping into my Nigerian heritage, but from a distance,” he says. “I might go back to Nigeria once a year for a family occasion, but mostly I’d be pulling from ethereal resources I’d see in images or at the Brooklyn Museum... Suddenly in Senegal I had this direct source of history and culture that I was invested in first hand.” All this is wonderfully evident in the canvases that comprise his forthcoming debut display at the White Cube in Bermondsey this November. “We did a lot of dancing and saw a lot of dancing, and that has really fed into the expression and movement of the characters in my work,” he says. The paintings’ palette is often pulled straight from the streets of Senegal and Mexico City, “but I’m also still in grief, so a lot of the work comes from a place of enforced healing.”

CULTURED

TUNJI ADENIYI-JONES PAINTS A TURBULENT DANCE WITH IDENTITY

LONDON-BORN AND NEW YORK-BASED ARTIST TUNJI ADENIYI-JONES CREATES WORK THAT VIBRANTLY HIGHLIGHTS THE FLUIDITY, THE EXPANSIVENESS AND THE WEIGHT OF BLACK IDENTITY IN THE WORLD. AFTER SEMINAL EXPERIENCES IN NIGERIA, SENEGAL AND AMERICA, A FINE-ARTS DEGREE FROM OXFORD UNIVERSITY AND AN MFA FROM YALE UNIVERSITY, THE 28-YEAR-OLD NIGERIAN-BRITISH PAINTER PREPARES FOR HIS FIRST SOLO SHOWS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM, AT CHARLESTON AND WHITE CUBE BERMONDSEY.

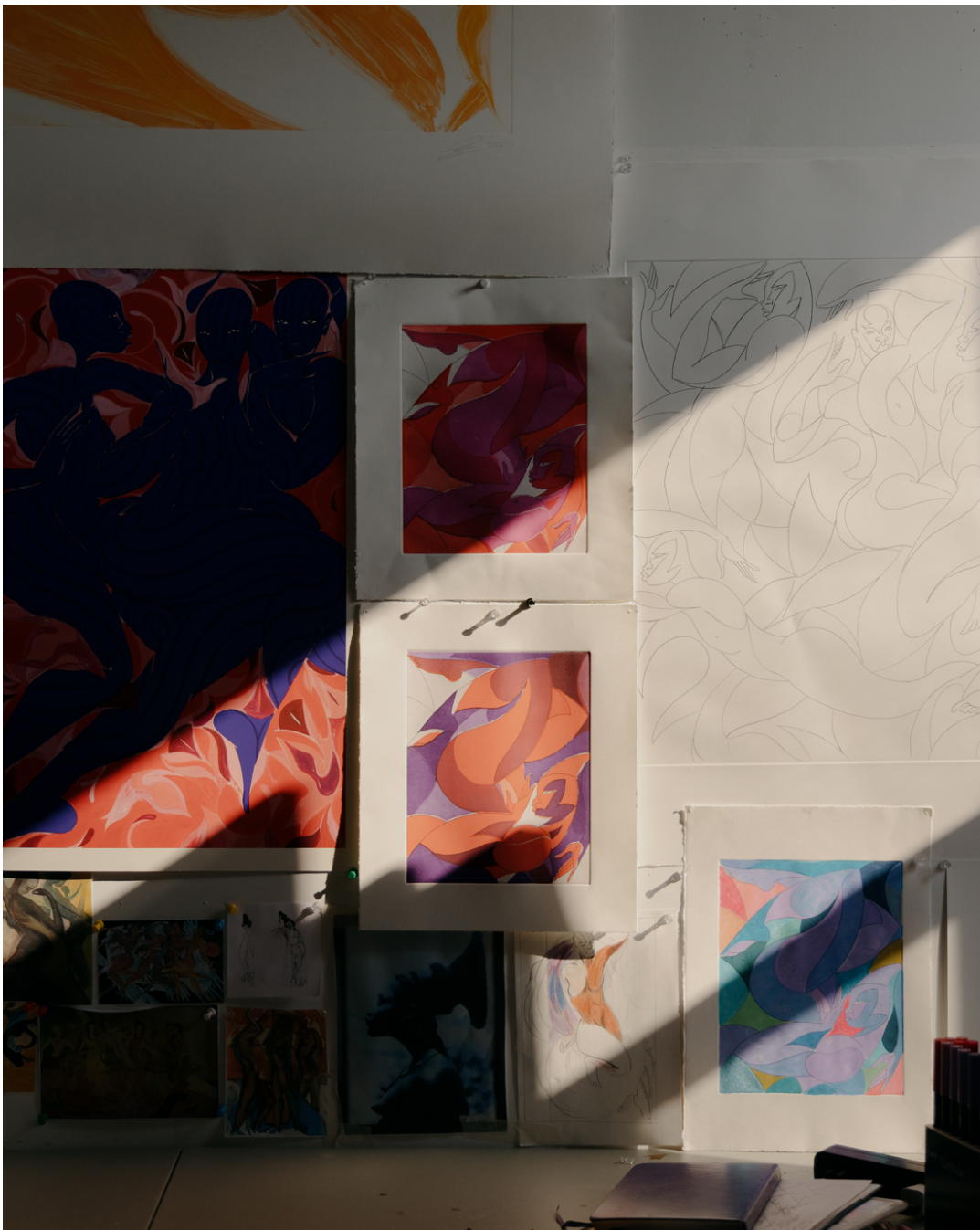
ENUMA OKORO | 09.20.2021 | PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM JESS LAIRD



TUNJI ADENIYI-JONES IN THE STUDIO.

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“It’s important for me to have first-hand experiences in situations where my Black identity is being engaged in different ways and that all comes down to what’s happening in these paintings,” says Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, the 28-year-old Nigerian-British painter, referring to how his travels, heritage and multicultural upbringing inform the figures in his new canvases. I caught up with the London-born, New York-based artist as he was at work in his Brooklyn studio preparing for a November 2021 exhibition with the London gallery White Cube, who began representing him this August.



SKETCHES AND MORE IN ADENIYI-JONES'S STUDIO.

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Large, muscular bodies rendered in rich colors float throughout the paintings. Limbs painted in violet blues and deep reds curve expansively throughout the picture planes, and it feels as if the fluid poses could come from a state of dance, conflict, embrace or flight. The figures appear androgynous, balanced and tuned into both their feminine and masculine energies. There is an intentional youthfulness to them that Adeniyi-Jones wants to speak to the sense of turbulence in their lives as they emerge into new life stages and senses of self. It's symbolic of his own continuous becoming. Flaming floral patterns brush and lick against their flesh. The bodies possess strength and grace, taking up space across the canvas and in our imaginations. It is a testament to Adeniyi-Jones's own expanding imagination on what it means to be a Black body in the world, with an ever-broadening sense of identity.

“When I started a bit back, I was definitely trying to say that these are Yoruba-inspired characters, but now I want [the interpretation] to be more open and accessible. I feel like I'm trying to paint a figure now that is more versatile culturally, so it's not specifically a West African figure. It could be a Black American, Black European or someone from anywhere else.”

When he moved to America, Adeniyi Jones was immediately taken by his new exposure to the rich and fantastic world of Black figurative painters like Kerry James Marshall, Aaron Douglas and Barkley Hendricks. “As soon as I moved to the East Coast and I was exposed to everything from James Baldwin to the Harlem Renaissance, my relationship to all this history [that until then] I hadn't been in contact with and that I couldn't actually feel as being relevant to me changed,” he says. “I would read about some Baldwin story, then I'd go for a walk and I would experience something unlike anything I could have in London or anywhere else and I'd go, ‘Okay I understand this.’ There's a very specific kind of Blackness in this country that has affected everything that's happening [in my paintings]. The work got hypercharged by that self-definition I was speaking to as well. It's benefited from me attaching myself to an expansive kind of history of the Black experience.”

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A recent resident of Kehinde Wiley's Black Rock program in Senegal, the experience left an indelible mark on Adeniyi-Jones. He says it added a layer of texture and complexity both to his work and to his personhood. The figures he's working on now first began taking shape in Senegal, and he admits to possessing a sense that certain spirits of the place remain in his consciousness.



CULTURED

“There’s turbulence in this work, and these characters are less tight than in my previous work. They are reaching out in a different way,” he says, adding that he’s become more keenly aware of the weight that comes with moving through the world in a Black body. “I think it’s important that these characters express a kind of strength, enough to deal with that weight. It’s important they express a level of preparedness for that.”

Adeniyi-Jones says he is telling us that these free-flowing figures are indeed Black and brown bodies, but he’s trying to highlight that fact through features like strength, fluidity and physicality, rather than through skin and facial details. “I’m trying to translate the weight of the movement, the experience of being Black and read in different ways in different places. It’s important to note the weight of this aspect of our existence.”



SPOTLIGHT:

TUNJI ADENIYI-JONES

The New York-based, London-born artist is getting ready for the next phase of his life and career.

Painter Tunji Adeniyi-Jones is learning to improvise. And between that and adapting to his new light-filled workspace, he's certainly keeping busy. The artist spoke to Platform from his Brooklyn studio about how his Stevie Wonder-attended Yale graduation didn't go as planned, why being additive is critical when it comes to conversations of race and what makes sports the most revealing element of American culture.

Platform

What makes a piece of art good?

PLATFORM:

Tunji

It's the artist's job to deliberate that in real-time and execute in practice. It's the critical historian's job to attempt to come up with inclusive answers. I'm working on a piece—I just moved into this new space—and I've been struggling with putting things together and I realize I haven't completed a work here yet. Emotionally, I have to break down that barrier and feel comfortable making work here. As I'm going through those motions, I'm telling myself, "This thing I'm making isn't good," just because it's a new context. What makes an artwork good? I would say there's an element of comfort and familiarity.

Platform

How important is the space where you work?

Tunji

Hugely important. I think the correct or incorrect space can push you or pull you in different directions, but it will have an unassailable effect on how you work. This new studio I have is on a bit of a slant, so as I move I'm veering off to the side a bit, which affects everything I do. The space has a huge effect on how the work is perceived, how it's made, how I live with the work and grow with the work.

Platform

Are you a planner or do you sort of improvise as you move along?

Tunji

I'm a heavy-duty planner who's trying to learn to improvise more. Sticky notes and reminders and calendar markers and things like that. I carry a sense of urgency and routine from my boarding school days when I was a teenager. I apply what was hammered into me in that stage of my life to the studio. Now, I'm loosening up a bit with those things.

Platform

Do you generally agree with the way people write or talk about your work?

Tunji

I've found that I do sometimes agree with it, but I do think in a moment when we're seeing such an incredible turnout of artists of color, I think my position as the non-American Black artist in America is particularly interesting. I think sometimes when people are trying to write about me and my work it does confuse that a tad. I'm not American, I'm not from here officially, but I do want it to

PLATFORM:

be acknowledged sometimes that I am bringing different background elements to the work I'm making.

Platform

Do you ever feel pigeonholed by how people have that conversation?

Tunji

I wouldn't say pigeonholed because I don't think there's an attempt to fully grasp it. I've avoided being classified in certain ways because it's not that straightforward. I had a painting acquired by PAMM [Pérez Art Museum Miami] and they in turn acquired some work by Kwame Brathwaite as well, so they changed the title of the collection to African and African American Diasporic Artists. Previously I think it was just African American Art. They made a distinction saying, "This encompasses the diaspora." That was an acknowledgement of how I'd like to see things, which is always additive.



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Platform

What do you listen to while you work?

Tunji

I have particular tones and keys and progressions in music that I like. There are certain chord progressions that occur in everything from trap music to Afro beats. I was listening to Amy Winehouse the other day. It was a song where she sampled a song by Nas who also sampled Amy Winehouse. They worked with the same producer who worked with Jay-Z. I like to hone in on that—going to the producer or the composer and finding a recurring theme that will draw me in.

Platform

How does your mood affect the things you listen to?

Tunji

I don't try and go against my mood, which is a thing I've learned. If I wake up feeling a certain way, I feed it and keep going with it because I find that I can be really productive regardless of the mood. Where it might get confusing is if I try to counteract it and go, "Well, I'm feeling a bit lower today. Let me try to make myself feel a bit up." And that doesn't work as well for me. I find if I'm feeling a bit lower, I actually have a selection of music I listen to to sit in that space very comfortably and then just get on with my day and be quite effective.

Platform

Is there a hobby you love?

Tunji

Music was one of the things I used to do and it had to fall by the wayside a little bit. I used to play the tuba. There was a certain point where I had to make a decision if I was going to go one way or the other, sort of the fine art route or serious musical training. Also, I exercise a lot, but I see that as a supplement to my studio practice to help me stay kind of grounded in and out of the studio.

Platform

Emotionally or in the physicality of your practice?

Tunji

Both. If I get particularly frustrated, it's easy to do some exercise and just clear my head a little bit. It offers time for reflection and a different level of exertion, which translates to sports. I have a weird personal theory that, especially in

PLATFORM:

America, the major sports associations, franchises and leagues are synonymous with commercial art and music and Hollywood and everything. Having lived in this country for six-and-a-half years now, I've learned the most about American culture through sports.

Platform

How so?

Tunji

It's incredibly revealing because it's driven by masses of public consumption. That means there are masses of consumers. It's driven by financial revenue that is absurd. The athletes, the performers, the creators, the artists involved are similarly compensated, but also treated in such a way that you can get a measure of the temperature of what's going on in this country by what's happening in the NBA or the NFL. The positions young artists are put in are very similar to the positions young athletes are put in. The money involved in the franchises here is so large. And similarly, the art market is so large. I see it all working in a very similar way. The most successful artists, sometimes you'll chalk it up to skill or luck and it's the same with athletes. They don't get injured. Is that luck? I don't know. You only have a certain number of stars and it seems to be predetermined. The same thing happens in the art world.

Platform

You went through Yale's graduate program. Did being in an art school environment help form a lot of those thoughts about how things are predetermined?

Tunji

Yes, 100 percent. I didn't understand or know the history of that program until I moved here. It's not a history that's shared across the Atlantic the same way. Things became very organized and preordained in a way that I wasn't sure about beforehand. That definitely adjusted my mindset about being a professional in this business.

Platform

How did it shift things?

Tunji

I came to that program with a certain mentality, but that was shattered very quickly, in the most necessary way. I didn't understand what it would mean to be

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an artist. For example, the first question you asked about a good artwork, perhaps I would have had an answer for that. I think I'm more invested in long-term answers now and thinking more deeply.

Platform

Are you superstitious about anything?

Tunji

So many things! I believe in cosmic and karmic action and in the power of words and intentions. I get quite scared sometimes. I think having the thought is OK, but actually vocalizing things can be quite real. The reason I feel that way is I know in my life I've been quite fortunate, not in the conventional sense, but perhaps in the timing sense.



Platform

What do people notice most about you and your personality?

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Tunji

People say I'm very quiet. I guess the way that becomes a thing is because I'm also very present. I'll be somewhere, but I won't be loud about it. It's an interesting distinction between not needing to be heard, but always wanting to have proximity. It's something I inherit from my family on my father's side. All the folks on that side of the family are quiet.

Platform

Do you have any habits you're trying to break?

Tunji

Several, like stress eating. And then in terms of the work, allowing more failure and mistakes to come in. I tend to want to overcorrect or over-perfect things. In relation to the work I'm showing on Platform, it's a nice moment where I'm starting to use some watercolor and some ink, mediums which are slightly less in my control. Allowing control to ease up a bit and letting the work manifest on its own.

Platform

Is there something you'd want to start over again?

Tunji

On my graduation from grad school, I don't know whether it was food poisoning or I just had a crazy night before, but I was sick. Stevie Wonder came to get an honorary diploma and it was this big event and I was throwing up behind one of the colleges all day. I had family fly in from Nigeria, I had my parents fly in from London, I had family come in from DC. It was this big, "Come and celebrate this day with Tunji," and I was sick all day. People flew in from Nigeria and I couldn't even have lunch with them.

Platform

Were you able to get together with everyone the next day at least?

Tunji

I was. And, of course, the ceremony still happened and I received my diploma and I was fine, but it was everything around that was a bit of a mess. That immediately comes to mind because it seems like a moment where perhaps there was something that was supposed to happen in a way and it just didn't.

Platform

PLATFORM:

Is there anything you wished you were asked more often?

Tunji

If it had to do with my work, it would be more of a question of my cross-cultural, hybridized experience. I think that's a conversation that doesn't happen as often. It's something I would want to talk about more, that sort of cultural addition, combination and collaboration rather than confrontation.



THE ART NEWSPAPER

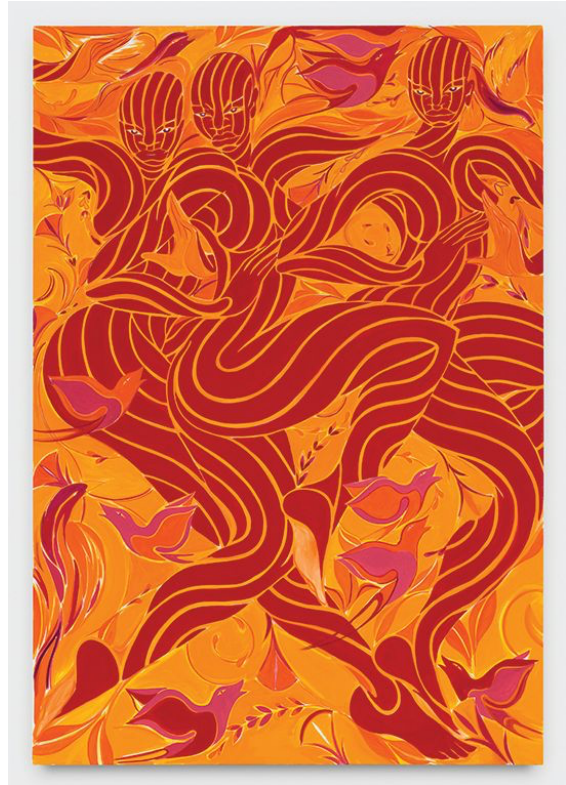
Pérez Art Museum Miami renames endowment fund for Black art to reflect the wider diaspora

The announcement coincides with acquisitions of works by Gordon Parks, Kwame Brathwaite and Tunji Adeniyi-Jones

BY GABRIELLA ANGELETI

The Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM) has acquired artworks by Kwame Brathwaite, Gordon Parks and Tunji Adeniyi-Jones through the Fund for Black Art, an endowment fund previously titled the Fund for African American Art that has been renamed to reflect a more accurate definition of the Black diaspora in its collection, which includes artists from Latin America and the Caribbean.

The announcement was made by PAMM’s director, Franklin Sirmans, during the museum’s eighth annual benefit (hosted virtually this year due to the coronavirus pandemic) on 6 February to support the endowment fund, which museum patron Jorge M. Pérez and the Miami-based Knight Foundation launched in 2013.



“The last four years, and especially the Black Lives Matter protests last summer, have obviously prompted introspection and sparked thousands of constructive conversations,” Sirmans tells *The Art Newspaper*. “While the fund’s definition of African American was used expansively in the past, this change acknowledges that we are committed to Black art and the Black diaspora on a global level, and that the fund is an infinite and not a finite project.”

The works acquired by PAMM include *Untitled (AJASS Model on Black Background)* (around 1970s; printed 2019) by the Brooklyn-born photographer Kwame Brathwaite; *Untitled, Harlem, New York* (1963) by the Kansas-born photographer Gordon Parks, and the painting *Dance in Heat II* (2020) by the Brooklyn-based artist Tunji Adeniyi-Jones.

Brathwaite and Parks both “create conversations about the past around art and activism”, and both “fit into our holdings in 20th-century photographs”, while Adeniyi-Jones offers an important “generational balance” to the acquisition, Sirmans says.

The exhibition *Polyphonic: Celebrating PAMM’s Fund for African American Art* (until 1 March)—a show that opened in February last year—features some of the artworks the museum has acquired since launching the fund, including pieces that have become cornerstones of its collection by artists like Ed Clark, Juana Valdes, Tschabalala Self and Xaviera Simmons.

Inside ‘Young Gifted And Black’: A Project Celebrating The Great Black Artists Of Our Time

BY YANIYA LEE | 28 AUGUST 2020

A new exhibition and accompanying book of Black contemporary art spotlights different generations of Black creatives and the Black collectors and curators that support them. *Vogue* meets three of the contributing artists to hear how they trace black experiences in their practice.

More often than not, you'll find Antwaun Sargent immaculately turned out in [Gucci](#) and his Esenshel hat at an art opening, front row of a fashion show, or part of on-stage conversations. As a writer and critic, *The New Black Vanguard* author has been instrumental in leading discussions about the importance of Black creative practice. Recently, Sargent shifted his attention to curating, and joined artist and writer [Matt Wycoff](#) and collector Bernard Lumpkin to organise *Young Gifted and Black*, an exhibition and accompanying book of Black contemporary art selected from the New York-based Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art. The intergenerational set of artists includes Kara Walker, Sadie Barnette, D'Angelo Lovell Williams, Jordan Casteel, Deana Lawson, Jacolby Satterwhite, Tunji Adeniyi-Jones and Chiffon Thomas.

As the story goes, after the death of his father, Lumpkin left his job as a producer at MTV to strengthen his relationship with his own Black heritage by collecting black art and patronising emerging artists. “What’s interesting about Bernard and [his husband] Carmine [Boccuzzi]’s story is that it’s connected to a history of Black patrons — starting with Alain Locke, all the way up through the 20th and 21st century — who have supported Black artists and the development of their work and their careers because they were invested in this notion of community,” Sargent tells *Vogue*.

VOGUE

The book, edited by Sargent, features artworks that test traditional forms of representation and comprises essays, interviews, and first-person reflections by the artists. Unlike the original exhibition, the book, he says, was allowed to be a lot more experimental: “We used the works in the collection as a starting point as opposed to an endpoint. Not only do we have young Black artists, we also have young Black curators and thinkers who were responding to those artists’ works.”

Here, we speak to three artists — Thomas, Adeniyi-Jones, and Barnette — about their contributions to *Young Gifted and Black*, and how they trace different aspects of the Black experience in their practice.



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, *Blue Dancer*, 2017.

VOGUE

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones

London-born painter Tunji Adeniyi-Jones studied fine art at Oxford before earning his MFA from Yale. Using vivid colours on large-scale canvases, the 28-year-old fluidly combines West African tradition with European forms.

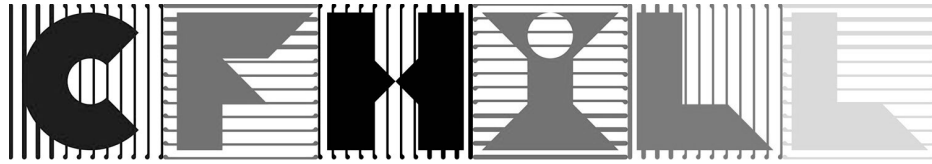
You were raised by Nigerian parents in the UK, then moved to the United States to study. How have you encountered different kinds of blackness?

“Moving to New York was an entirely eye-opening experience for me. The sort of energy that was centralised around the Black body in America felt a lot different to what I was used to in the UK, and also different from what I was used to going back to Nigeria. There’s a charge around Blackness that I experienced when I was in the US — the attention I get in the street, whether it’s confrontational or not, there’s a tension. And that hasn’t happened to me anywhere near as much in the UK.

“When I go to Nigeria, it’s a different kind of experience. There’s more of a sense of you fusing into your surroundings and collective identity and experience. You often fall into some sort of crowd mentality, it suddenly becomes about everything around me as well as me. And I don’t stick out quite as much. That’s a different kind of Blackness — you don’t even need to call yourself Black there.”

Can you describe ‘Blue Dancer’, the painting in the ‘*Young, Gifted and Black*’ exhibition and book cover?

“*Blue Dancer* is larger than life. It’s this very versatile acrobatic figure that’s not quite male or female — a mysterious figure that defies any kind of media categorisation or identification. It’s definitely African. I wanted it to be accessible to all the different kinds of Black voices I was talking about.”



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones

“The language of dance and performance transcends all cultural boundaries.”

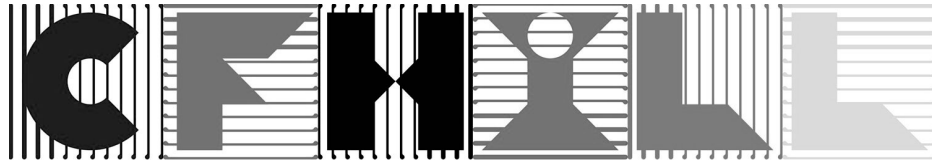
Tunji Adeniyi-Jones uses figurative painting as a means to explore West African history and its associated mythology. Adeniyi-Jones renders colourful and vibrant bodies that are larger than life, taking inspiration from both his Yoruba heritage and his British upbringing.

Where in the world are you right now and what are you doing?

— Right now I’m trying to read in my apartment in Brooklyn. I say ‘trying’ because it’s been incredibly hard to concentrate with all that’s been going on recently! We’re entering into our third week of self-isolation/social distancing in New York. I know it varies from place to place. Other areas have been under citywide self-isolation protocols for months now.

What can you tell us about the work you have made for the exhibition?

— I’m really excited about the works I’m showing because they highlight the early stages of my ideas before they go on to become paintings. It’s a pretty special insight into how I come up with the compositions, shapes and colours for my paintings. The monotype is one of the most painter-friendly printmaking mediums, I think. It’s a really quick and expressive form of image-making, and I’ve been working with this medium for several years now. Usually, when I get stuck in the studio, I’m able to work through the mental blocks by making some monotype prints.



Why do you think you are an artist?

— I’ve always known that I would dedicate my life to the creative arts in some shape or form. I was a very keen and studious musician when I was younger, and I was completely obsessed with drawing. I think it was really important to have the support of my parents and school faculty during these formative years. That encouragement and reinforcement were so crucial.

How would you describe the type of work you do?

— I definitely strive to make paintings that are bold and authoritative. I like to use colour, line and form as my tools to achieve this.

What themes do you pursue in your art?

— I’m really interested in West African history and mythology. I draw a great deal of inspiration from my Yoruba heritage, and I try to incorporate as many of these traditional customs as possible into my work . I’m fascinated by the ways in which longstanding traditions can still bear relevance to the present day, and I want my paintings to be a visual account of this investigation.

You find inspiration for your figurative paintings in West African history and mythology , as well as your Yoruba heritage. How can one see this in your art?

— The figures depicted in my paintings are very alluring and striking. Many of their poses invoke a sense of performance or dance. There are thousands of different dialects spoken across West Africa but one of the most unifying languages is communicated through the body. This language of dance and performance transcends all cultural boundaries and my intention is to charge the bodies in my paintings with this same vigour. Equally, one of the most impressive characteristics of any West African sculpture is the physical presence held by each object. Whether life-size or miniature, these sculptures convey a memorable sense of personality and spirit. So my hope is to translate a similar sense of physicality through my work.

Interview by Destinee Ross
BLACK VOICES/BLACK MICROCOSM
CFHILL, Stockholm, Sweden
April 8 – May 9, 2020

Art Fairs

4 Sensational Painters Who Stole the Show at Independent New York 2020, Where Oil-on-Canvas Is Still the Cutting Edge

Galleries presented strong work by several new names to keep an eye on.

Artnet News, March 5, 2020

If New York art fairs were like the film industry, the Armory Show would be the big-studio blockbuster and the [Independent New York](#) would be the cool indie festival film: where the real critics go for substance and style.

It's also a great place to discover new talent young and old—something that's become nearly impossible at its blue-chip sibling on the piers. With that in mind, here are the best discoveries at this year's Independent, the 12th edition of the fair. A hint: painting stole the show.

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

On the Walls: Tunji Adeniyi-Jones's work has drawn comparisons to that of Henri Matisse in the past. With his spring garden color palette and curving, elongated figures, the reference is particularly apt at Independent, where the 27-year-old painter debuts a series of paintings and works on paper inspired by his time in Dakar, Senegal, at Kehinde Wiley's Black Rock residency program.

In a trio of complementary canvases that evoke West African rituals, scarred figures dance among birds and flowers before a monochromatic backdrop. In *Greeting Gifts* (2020), which depicts a more allegorical scene, a woman is offered a pair of masks by two men.

Price Range: \$3,000 for works on paper; \$25,000 for paintings



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones. *Greeting Gifts* (2020). Courtesy of Nicelle Beauchene Gallery.

Art Fairs

Looking for Fresh Talent? Here Are 7 Rising-Star Artists to Seek Out at Armory Week 2020 in New York

From the Armory Show to Independent to SPRING/BREAK, this week's New York fairs offer a sampling of exciting new talents.

Maria Vogel, March 2, 2020

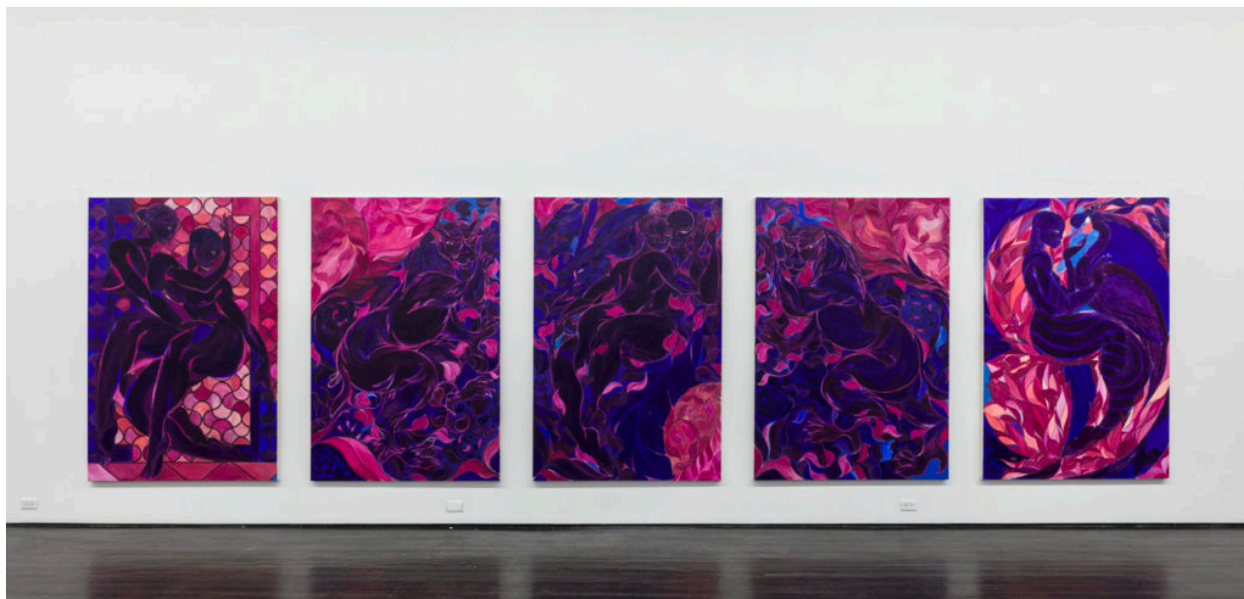
The art world is preparing to descend on Manhattan this week for the 2020 edition of the Armory Show. What historically took place in individual rooms at the Gramercy Park Hotel now resides across two vast piers stretching out into the Hudson River. But of course, the Armory isn't the only show in town this week—no fewer than eight satellite fairs are taking place, too, offering something for every collector's taste and budget.

To help you navigate the influx of art, we've highlighted a group of up-and-coming talents to look out for—each with eye-catching work, critical and curatorial buzz, and a prominent presence at one of the week's fairs. Happy looking.



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, *A Master's Secret* (2019). Courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beachene Gallery.

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones



Who: With a few years to go before turning 30, Adeniyi-Jones has been forging a name for himself with his fiercely bold figurative paintings that explore West African history and mythology.

Based in: New York, New York

Where to See It: Nicelle Beauchene's presentation at Independent

What to Look Out for: For Independent, Adeniyi-Jones will debut large paintings and works on paper that he developed as one of 16 inaugural fellows at Kehinde Wiley's Black Rock residency in Dakar. A 2017 graduate of Yale's MFA program, the artist has also exhibited at Eric Firestone Gallery and Johannes Vogt Gallery, among others.

Prices: \$20,000 to \$25,000 for large-scale paintings; \$2,000 for works on paper

Fun Fact: He made [the 2020 edition of Forbes's 30 under 30 list](#) (for which Kehinde Wiley, not coincidentally, served as a judge).

Up Next: Adeniyi-Jones's work is currently on view in the traveling exhibition "Young, Gifted, and Black: the Lumpkin-Bocuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art," organized by Antwaun Sargent, as well as in the group show "All of Them Witches" at Deitch Projects in Los Angeles. He has a busy rest of the year as well: the artist will premiere new work at Morán Morán in Los Angeles in May, will be included in the Dakar Biennial this summer, and is slated to show in Ugo Rondinone's 39 Great Jones Street window series this fall.

EDITORIAL



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones' *Patterns & Rituals*

Patterns & Rituals marks Tunji Adeniyi-Jones' second solo exhibition at Nicelle Beauchene for the young British-Nigerian artist. Adeniyi-Jones' work feels at once fluid and solid. Liquid-like figures move through a tornado of pink and purple foliage, yet the work is flat, authoritative. In a way Adeniyi-Jones' work feels like music – pulsing, repeating, transporting us to another realm. The scale and uniformity of the paintings causes reverberations throughout the space. Visions of stain-glass come to mind, in this artist's place of worship. Inspired by classical West African folklore and the religious practices of Nigerian's Yoruba tradition, Adeniyi-Jones investigates methods of idolatry and myth. At the heart of Adeniyi-Jones' practice is the idea of ritualized repetition, also key to the maintenance of prayer and ceremony. *Patterns & Rituals* is on view at Nicelle Beauchene until January 26th.

– Claire Millbrath

January 24, 2020

Forbes

THE 2020



ART & STYLE

Creating and designing the future of fashion and the arts

Edited by Susan Adams, Samantha Sharf, Michael Solomon and Kristin Tablang
Judged by Tory Burch, Sarah Staudinger and Kehinde Wiley



Courtesy John C. Edmonds.

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones

Adeniyi-Jones finds inspiration for his figurative paintings in West African history and mythology and in his own Yoruban heritage. Artforum magazine has compared him to Matisse. The son of Nigerian immigrants, he was born and raised in London and earned an MFA from Yale. The Dallas Museum of Art owns one of his paintings and he has had solo shows in New York, London and Los Angeles.

9 Leading Advisors, Dealers, and Art-World Insiders Tell Us Which Artists They Think Are Poised to Break Out in 2020

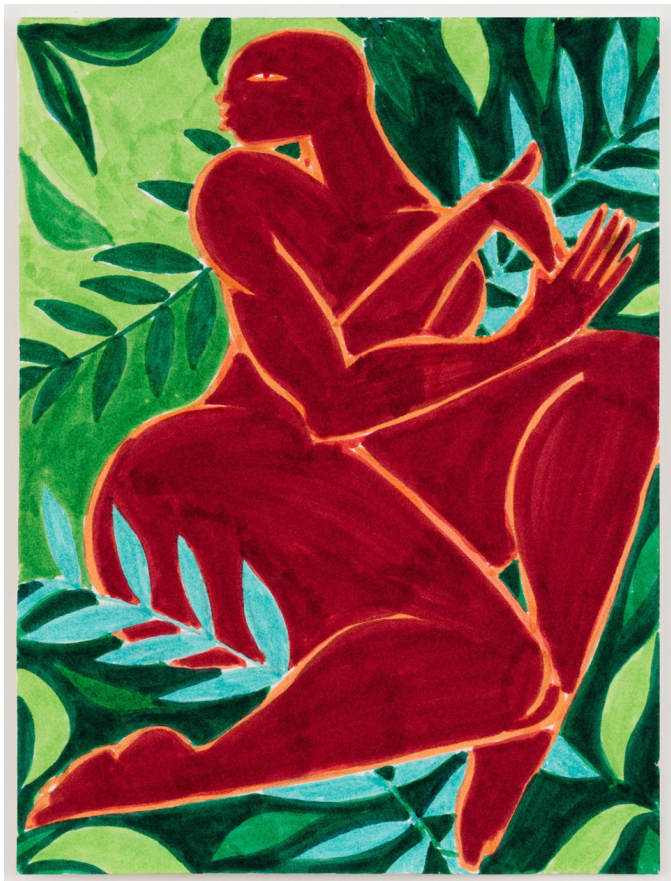
Keep your eye on these rising stars.

Artnet News, December 20, 2019

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones

I think Tunji Adeniyi-Jones will be the breakout star of 2020. He's a young British-Nigerian artist who makes vibrant figurative paintings inspired by his Yoruba heritage. His second New York solo exhibition just opened at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, and he is one of 16 artists, from over 700 applicants, to be selected for Kehinde Wiley's Black Rock Senegal residency.

—*Molly Krause, communications strategist*



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, *Untitled* (2018). Courtesy of Nicelle Beauchene Gallery.



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones: Cross Cultural Aesthetics, Hybridity And The History Of Painting

BY ADEOLUWA OLUWAJOBA | APRIL 15, 2019



New York City-based artist, Tunji Adeniyi-Jones received his Bachelors in Fine Arts from Oxford University and his MFA in painting/printmaking from Yale School of Art. Born in England to Nigerian parents, Adeniyi-Jones has spent a great deal of time between London and Lagos. This cultural duality is at the core of his practice and through painting, sculpture, printmaking, and collage, he attempts to articulate the contemporary aesthetic of the African diaspora through the lens of European history. In this interview with *Omenka*, he discusses his recent exhibition at the Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, *Work on Paper*; his interest in cross-cultural aesthetics and cultural hybridity, as well as the exploration of African mythology in his work.



Your exhibition *Work on Paper* is currently on view at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York. Kindly tell us a bit about the exhibition and the works shown.

This show features an arrangement of small works on paper that are a very important part of my practice. I've been building this body of work over the past few years, so it felt like the right time to show them as a marker of how my ideas have gradually grown and matured. Each work is an experiment or a study that has then gone on to become a painting, so the exhibition gives the viewer an intimate insight into the thought process behind my larger works.

You were born in the UK, are of Nigerian descent, and currently live in the United States. How have your dual heritage and cultural experiences on three different continents influenced your work, and how do you reconcile them?

I am extremely proud of my Nigerian heritage and equally grateful for my British upbringing. The combination of these two cultures, each having its own rich and expansive art history, has influenced me from a very young age. Throughout my childhood, I was exposed to a vast array of West African sculpture and textiles, both in my household and during trips to Nigeria. This was instrumental to the development of my bright and vibrant colour palette. I also admired the work of British artists like Lucien Freud, David Hockney, and Francis Bacon. Through all of these formative encounters, I developed a love for painting and a tendency to represent the figure. There are so many compelling cultural crossovers between European art and West African art, and my work is an exploration of this exchange, especially seeing as I can claim ownership over both sides of this transaction. I'm interested in how cross-cultural aesthetics and cultural hybridity relate to the history of painting. European modernist movements like Cubism and Expressionism simply would not exist without the influence of West African sculpture. This kind of interrelation is often overlooked or discredited. Moving to America has added another layer of complexity to this perspective, and I've thoroughly enjoyed immersing myself in a new environment. I feel very fortunate to be able to travel between these continents and document my findings through painting.

You hold a BFA from The Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford, and an MFA in painting from Yale School of Art, Yale University, but your work increasingly explores the history and mythology of the ancient West African kingdoms. How do you successfully fuse these African themes with your Western education and conventions?

I often think back to the Greek mythology and ancient Roman history that I was exposed to as a student, and I try to look at ancient West African history through the same lens. These ancient kingdoms all ran parallel to each other, but because of reductive concepts like primitivism, we rarely see ancient West African history being taught outside of the continent. Every notable Greek myth and fable that we know of has an equally compelling African counterpart. These cultural equivalents have been brilliantly detailed through the literary works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and many others, but there is still much room left for visual representation.

Your highly stylised figures are usually shown in acrobatic, floating, sensuous poses. What is your underlying philosophy?

I want the figures depicted in my paintings to be alluring, authoritative, and striking. Many of their poses invoke a sense of physical performance or dance. There are thousands of different dialects spoken across



West Africa, but the most powerful language is communicated through the body. This language of dance and performance transcends all cultural boundaries, and my intention is to charge the bodies in my paintings with this same vigour. One of the most impressive characteristics of any West African sculpture is the physical presence held by each object. Whether life-size or miniature, these sculptures convey a memorable sense of personality and spirit, so I strive to capture physical expression.

Is there an additional significance to their frequent depiction among lush vegetation?

I often try to place my figures in environments that are complementary. So, most of my compositions consist of a body situated in a large field of colour. I like to use this colour space to emphasise motion flowing in and around the figure. I've found that foliage also works particularly well for this because leaves and vines can be used to emulate the curves and shape of the body. I've also taken a lot of inspiration from authors like Amos Tutuola and Octavia Butler. In their wonderfully articulated universes, the jungle space represents a site of infinite possibility. So I try to give animation to nature in the same way.

Your figures also vaguely recall Ben Enwonwu's famous 'Negritude' series, which actively celebrate the Black race. Are you inspired by his work, and what are your points of departure?

I consider Ben Enwonwu to be a pioneer of West African modernism. His work serves as an extensive guide for me as I develop my artistic language. His figures are so effortlessly fluid and expressive. This is definitely something that I am conscious of whenever I paint or draw. I feel honoured to be able to expand upon the themes that he originated throughout the 20th century, and I hope to carry them further forward throughout my own practice.

Traditional African art has always been intertwined with the religion of the people. Is there a religious aspect to your work?

Yes, I draw a great deal of inspiration from my Yoruba ancestry and heritage. Although I don't practise the religion, there are many religious aspects to my paintings. I spend a lot of time familiarising myself with traditional Yoruba customs and try to incorporate as much of it as possible into my work. For example, I've given a few of my paintings very specific titles, such as *Eshu* and *Iyalawo*. I enjoy using popular themes and beliefs surrounding iconic Yoruba deities as a starting point in my work. I'm also captivated by ritual masks from all across the West Africa region. The Yoruba Egungun mask has featured in my work, and also masks from the Bwa and Baule. So, I make a point of researching other religious practices too. Ultimately I want there to be an equal allocation of specificity and accessibility to the subject matter in my work.

What forthcoming project would you like to share with us?

I am currently working towards a solo exhibition at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, which will take place early in 2020.

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones

NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY

327 Broome Street

November 16–December 23

In all but one of the eight large paintings on view in Tunji Adeniyi-Jones's assured solo debut, a curvaceous, androgynous figure, or pair, floats in space, twisting and turning ethereally through dense vegetation, the coils of a serpent, or gentle foliage that may well be underwater. Adeniyi-Jones's compositions pack everything into a shallow plane. What appears at first to be rougher, more gestural brushwork—in, say, the upper right corner of an otherwise super-smooth canvas such as *Blue Dancer*, 2017—becomes, with a closer look, an almost divine source of light filtering into the picture, adding depth, enhancing color, and deepening the mystery of who, what, and when we are seeing.

Paintings such as *Red Twins*, 2016, owe an obvious debt to Matisse. The two *Blue Dancer* paintings included here, both 2017, seem inconceivable without the dramatic turn in Chris Ofili's career to the blue paintings he began making in

Trinidad twelve years ago. But the real engine of influence is the book giving this exhibition its name—Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* (1984), a magisterial study of how the visual arts and philosophies of five ancient African civilizations traveled from the old world to the new, with everything from cosmograms and ideographs to praise-chants and divination literature taking on radically new forms and purposes as they entered the cultural milieu of Mexico, Brazil, the Caribbean, and the American South.

Flash of the Spirit was first published not quite a decade before Adeniyi-Jones was born in London to a Yoruba family from Nigeria. Filled with drawings, photographic reproductions of priceless artifacts, and irresistible passages on notions of paradise and mystic coolness, Thompson's book also provides a generous framework for the artist's stylized vocabulary and playfulness with time.



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, *Blue Dancer*, 2017, oil on canvas, 68 x 54"

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

When Beauty Is a Draw and a Diversion

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones has discovered the benefits of unique stylization: objects and figures can be made in such a mannered way that they become visual metaphors, flexible in their vagueness.

Seph Rodney | 2 days ago



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones "Blue Dancer" (2017) oil on canvas, 68 x 54 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery)

Most of the figures in [Tunji Adeniyi-Jones's](#) exhibition at [Nicelle Beauchene gallery](#) seem shaped by the slow pull of a gravitational field that insists on everything assembling at its spiraling center; or, conversely, shaped by release from that field, in the process of resuming a more Euclidian form. Their thick, sloping thighs, curvilinear arms, cinched torsos, and tapered feet and hands are all stylized as if based on the template of a voluptuous falling leaf. Some of these leaves provide the backdrop for the foreshortened contexts in which the artist's figures are placed. These foreshortened

backgrounds, and the restricted palette of only two or three dominant colors in each piece — often hues of the primary pigmentation colors and primary additive colors for light, such as dark blue to deep indigo; the varied greens of foliage; or reds including tangerine and maroon — make these curvaceous figures feel like they come from fables.



Installation view of *Flash of the Spirit* at Nicelle Beauchene

Nichelle Beauchene released a press release for [*Flash of the Spirit*](#) that explains the figures as representations of “ancient royalty as well as deities of the Yoruba, called orisha.” But this seems only half possible. With his washy brush strokes Adeniyi-Jones has made figures that are so stylized they exist outside of time. Divine beings can do so (if you believe in Horus how possible is it to imagine a time when the god did not exist?), but aristocrats

are typically defined by their historical contexts. Adeniyi-Jones has discovered the benefits of unique stylization: objects and figures can be made in such a mannered way that they become visual metaphors, flexible in their vagueness. Because they aren’t associated with any specific set of narratives, they also become figures which we can project into our own stories. Coincidentally, they also become representative of their maker. Here the figures attach to something that I can identify, that is the painter’s ambitions and his vision, such as with Matisse’s cutouts in [*the Jazz series*](#). This all means that there isn’t much spirit for me to find here. There is lovely painting and ample fascinating style, and I’m left to wonder how far style can carry me and whether it will be to a worthwhile place.

[Tunji Adeniyi-Jones’s exhibition for *Flash of the Spirit* continues at Nicelle Beauchene gallery \(327 Broome Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan\) through December 23.](#)



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones “Red Twins” (2016) oil on canvas, 60 x 56 inches

ARTE FUSE

Flash of the Spirit: Tunji Adeniyi-Jones at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

by Ariana Akbari



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones: *Flash of the Spirit* – Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, Installation view, New York, 2017

I shot a few quick glances at the geometric designs hanging in the Jack Hanley Gallery on the first floor, threw a greeting to the two gallerists – in their office, busy rolling a canvas, and listened to the quiet knock-knock-knock of my Nike's as I tiptoed up the wooden staircase to the Nicelle Beauchene Gallery space. There, on the top floor, where there was still a view of the floor below, I felt an immediate sense of suspension, as if I was standing in the sky. From the white walls – clouds, if you will indulge this reviewer in extended metaphor – several large swaths of color beamed from their canvases, striking me like a veritable rainbow, and successfully ushering away the frost of the winter morning, ushering in a decidedly warm presence projected by the artist Tunji Adeniyi-Jones in his *Flash of the Spirit* exhibition.

Adeniyi-Jones draws influence from West African tradition and uses it to create his own world of captivating mythologies. The figures in the paintings alight from their surfaces, with voluptuous figures reminiscent of Matisse and colors reminiscent of those tropical flowers or butterflies that are so precious to rainforest landscapes. The characters on each canvas are at once regal, revolutionary, and filled with a near-animated spirit that cannot be named by the viewer. There is

a sense of power and mystique emanating from many of them – a result of their belonging to stories which we do not have the privilege of knowing.



Blue Dancer, 2017, oil on canvas, 68 x 54 inches.

Particularly striking are the *Blue Dancers*, displayed as a pseudo-diptych along one wall and bringing room for further comparison to Matisse and his *Blue Nudes*. In them, bright pinks forge their own paths amid an undulating sea of light-to-dark cobalt, and the bodies depicted are caught mid fluid-motion.



Resting Oryx, 2016, acrylic on paper, 80 x 80 inches.

The singular piece, *Resting Oryx*, of a depiction of an animal — an antelope species native to Africa — further contextualizes the fictionalized ancient mythological domain to which *Flash of the Spirit* makes its claim. Bright eyes eerily alight from a blue beast in a forest of bright green, projecting a wisdom more similar to that captured in the humanesque figures on the canvases it accompanies.

The world of Adeniyi-Jones is a world of glassy surfaces, delicate lines, and long strokes. The topographic quality of each makes them feel deeply personal in a way — as if you could imagine the hand tracing the lines. Although the mythologies depicted are largely unknown to the viewer, that is part of what makes them so intriguing. Along with imagining the physical creation of the pieces, one can imagine beyond them to the histories which prompted their creation.

Flash of the Spirit is not to be missed and is on view at the Nicelle Beauchene Gallery at 327 Broome St. until December 23, 2017.



The Magus, 2017, oil on canvas, 74 x 60 inches.