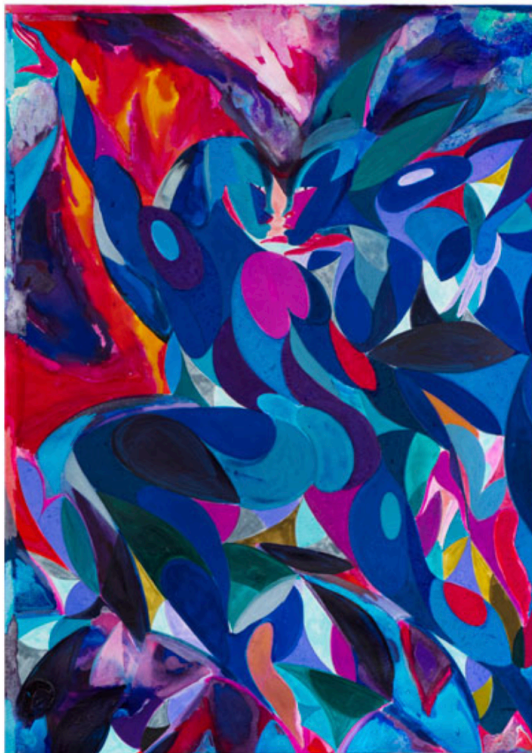


New Additions: Tunji Adeniyi-Jones

Habiba Hopson



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, *A Flashy Encounter*, 2021. Watercolor, ink, and acrylic on paper. Image: 16 1/2 × 11 5/8 in. Frame: 19 1/2 × 14 9/16 × 11 1/2 in.

The Studio Museum in Harlem; Museum purchase with funds provided by The Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family 2022.17

Courtesy the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

New Additions is a series of interviews with artists whose work was newly acquired in the Studio Museum's permanent collection. This inaugural conversation features artist Tunji Adeniyi-Jones in discussion of his work *A Flashy Encounter*. You can read or listen to the conversation below.

Habiba Hopson

My name is Habiba Hopson. I'm Curatorial Assistant of Collections at The Studio Museum in Harlem, and I'm here with Tunji Adeniyi-Jones. Tunji, thank you so much for your time and participation in our new Studio online interview series where we chat with artists whose works are new additions to the Museum's permanent collection. You are the first artist to be interviewed for this series. Thanks so much for kicking this off.

Maybe we can start off with you telling us a bit about your background, both culturally and then also professionally and in the visual arts. Can you walk us through your life and your career?

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones

I would say I have a very, very thorough art education. I did my undergraduate at Oxford and then I took a year off, and then I came here to do my master's in painting—my undergraduate was in fine art and art history. I was really into being a student and enjoyed learning from my classmates—the process and the exchange. I did feel, in London when I was graduating, that things were limited for me on a culturally sensitive level. I was one of the only Black students in my entire school department. I felt like the work I wanted to make that was authentic and true to me wasn't being enforced by my environment.

My parents moved from Nigeria to England, where they met in the '70s or something. So, I'm Nigerian-British, and around that time I started thinking about my cultural heritage as being the main focal point of my work. I just wasn't finding the faculty in the UK as engaging as they could be. I did have one amazing professor, of course—everyone knows Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. She was my one professor of color and she's also a painter and she was telling me I needed to be exposed to more artists of color. That's kind of what brought me over here. Then things steamrolled in terms of me developing a language and a visual lexicon and I was just absorbing everything. I came with an open mind and a lack of a sense of self or identity that really lent itself well to doing an MFA program, especially one as rigorous as Yale's.

You have to be so receptive in a space like that. You really must have a relationship with ego and self that is malleable, to say the least. So, I ended up learning a lot, meeting some interesting people, some amazing artists who I'm still friends with today. This piece in question is a nice expression of a combination of some of these ideas I've now been thinking about to do with Northeast American art history, specifically the Harlem Renaissance era, and how all the art that came from that era came to characterize a kind of civil movement and also civil expression. That, alongside the Négritude movement, which happened also in the twentieth century, and how those two sorts of histories were moving alongside each other.

This is why when I first went to Senegal it was such a special thing because I was also exposed to that side of academia, that really extensive Senegalese art, historical academia, Francophone, post-colonial, neo-colonial thought that is so complicated in its own way. There are lots of interesting interactions between [James] Baldwin's logic and Léopold Senghor and certain historians from that period operating in West Africa and Europe. Thinking about the Black body as it's used in imagery and music and film and anything. In the work I've been doing, I'm thinking about all those things coalescing. *A Flashy Encounter* is a very experimental piece... Lots of combinations of imagery and history are focused on a very dynamic figurative representation of the Black body.

HH

Beautiful answer. I love this play and exploration of the Harlem Renaissance, but also of these Francophone ways of thought; pinning someone like Senghor next to someone like James Baldwin, or putting these philosophers, these thinkers side-by-side with one another, but in a visual context. What does it look like to visualize these histories as being quite intertwined, encountering one another, and what happens when that encounter happens? Like, boom, there's a flash or eruption. I would love to think more deeply about the work that's now in our collection, *A Flashy Encounter*. First off, I think the title, "a flashy encounter," suits the scene so incredibly well. You have what looks like these two beings, two spirits, two of these floating figures. Maybe they're twins, maybe they're lovers, maybe they're a mirror to one another, but they're coming together in the sort of center of the frame. Their sheer encounter—their gaze—sparks a fire, sparks some flashy eruption. I'm curious, how did you conjure up this sort of scene?

TAJ

I had been looking at Charles Cullen's illustrations, and then Richard Bruce Nugent's illustrations. That's very specifically early twentieth-century queer figurative image making. Then that was entwined with Aaron Douglas. They would make these illustrations for poems or for prose, and there was something about how dramatic they always were. It would always be this dramatic scene of a silhouetted figure carrying another silhouetted figure that's kind of falling backward or something. Or it seemed always very romantic, or it was charged in this way that I thought, on a purely image making basis, was really inspiring. So, I had been thinking about ways of showing interactions in this deeply flat but expressive and dramatic way.

It's about using the silhouette, using a profile of a face that's... What's the word? That's cut out in this way, and then somehow addition comes through subtraction. You can take away certain features and identifying marks and then that can actually add a kind of charge. So, that's happening with this. Because this work wasn't initially intended for a show or anything, I spent a lot of time on it. I worked on a few of these pieces in Mexico. I'd been traveling between London and America, and there were all these travel bans that meant that you couldn't go from one place to the other. I spent a lot of time in Mexico, and some of these pieces were made there. That allowed me to slow down the picture space and add more of these abstract reactions that are happening in the lower right-hand corner—typically, something I wouldn't give myself time to do in a work.

And equally, the kind of molten hot, red flame in the top left space is an engagement with the medium I was able to do because I would pour some ink there and then I would leave it and then I would come back to it maybe in a couple of days. There wasn't quite a specific intention. The work was able to go through different phases and there was a different sense of urgency. Frankly, there wasn't any urgency at all. It allowed for lots of different things to happen at once within this picture frame. I think previously the work would normally only have one of those aspects. Maybe it's all one move, and this was allowed to have quite a few different ones in it. The two figures staring at each other intensively in the middle, that's straight off those Richard Bruce Nugent and Charles Cullen illustrations that are just so dramatic, just pure drama and intensity.

HH

I would love to open up a larger conversation around color because I think color is quite central; your colors are so vivid. This work especially is adorned with deep blues and violets and fuchsias and reds. Color, for me at least, can engineer a feeling. It can spark some emotion. I'm curious, with these ideas in mind, how do you go about choosing colors for this work? What is your relationship to color?

TAJ

It's a bit like you're saying. It's definitely to elicit a response that's emotive. I've been trying to experiment and put more things into the work. I've definitely created rules and boundaries and restrictions on what colors I can use at once. In a piece like this, you can see me allowing these really cool blues, really deep, dark blues, and then some really, really warm and kind of rosy violets and magentas and a fuchsia in there too. That combination isn't something I would normally have done in the same space.

Again, it came from this sense of freedom to make this work without a specific outcome. Just allowing the material to interact. Certainly, at that point, what I was looking at also was a lot of abstract work, abstract painting. Artists like Frank Bowling have slowly started to creep into what I would consider to be a color sensitivity of mine. Seeing the looseness and the fluidity of color in some of those abstract pieces.

I'd seen a couple of [Bowling's] shows, and then I was understanding his journey more importantly and understanding how he'd existed in a space I aligned with and had moved out of London to go to America...He had had this whole career and had gone back and forth. I was thinking about that and travel and migration and how those affect the color usage as well. Moving through Mexico, absorbing that palette, very soft, neutral tones, Dakar.

HH

Even thinking deeper about your style and technique with this work, this watercolor ink and acrylic. What is the relationship between paper and printmaking? I know your show at Nicelle Beauchene showcased both your paintings and your works on paper, I wonder what challenges arise when working with paper and what is that relationship for you between paper and printmaking.

TAJ

That's a really good question. The thing that the paper work has offered me, which wasn't happening in the paintings, but it's now something I'm going to work into implementing, is you have to work above it. These are made flat, and I was working on the horizontal, whereas the paintings are usually made vertically, I'm drawing on the wall. That made a big difference in how this is made because I was able to let the material on the medium interact without gravity. The water and the ink can pull in a way that's organic and in a way that's impossible to control. You have to let it do its thing. That's the beauty of printmaking, working flat, having this kind of pressure that's coming in from above down can lead to some really interesting results.

I hadn't been working that way before. This is one of the first pieces that I was trying that with, I think. This preceded a series of prints I made that were loose and a bit more transparent. But ultimately with this piece, I was experimenting. I was finding that, not that I painted myself into a corner, but I was feeling restricted by my own rules and boundaries. I was enjoying stripping back a little bit and allowing for some natural kinds of... Failure isn't the right word because you'd asked how it starts.

There's a pencil drawing and the main central figure that's holding most of the space, there's a pencil outline for that character, and then the figure that's coming in from outside of the frame, there's a pencil line for that. That's basically it. There are no more pencil lines in the entire piece. It's all material placed down. That's an uncommon way for me to work. Usually, I'll map out the whole thing and then color will be assigned to an area, but with a piece like this, it was far more organic, and far more process-driven and process based. A bit of drawing to keep the bodies in the middle, but outside of that, a very material, process-driven work.

HH

It's interesting because you were working on this piece at a time when there was perhaps more freedom to just do and to be.

TAJ

Exactly. It was especially a moment where suddenly it felt like the stakes had shifted a bit in what I felt like I needed to present and how I needed to present myself and to whom, and suddenly a lot of the pressure was taken off the work.

HH

And experimentation comes out of that, which is great. I'd love to speak more about your figures. For me, your figures have this timeless and ethereal quality to them. They're both somewhat representative or representational, but also quite abstract, with a sense of fluidity, which further deepens their appearance as otherworldly. What drew you to create your figures in this way?

TAJ

When this broader project started at grad school, I was specifically trying to represent Nigerian Yoruba characters. I was very specifically trying to say, these characters are inspired by this specific history I am connected to, that I'm interested in. Then I paused a bit, took a bit of a break from that. Senegal helped broaden my visual language of wanting to represent a different kind of West Africanness, a different kind of blackness. That looseness meant I could suddenly start representing these bodies that didn't have to be from a Yoruba background or from a Yoruba history. That allowed for this abstraction because one of the early things was body paint, body scarification, body work.

So, lines and forms and shapes on the bodies. When it suddenly doesn't have to become so specific to a kind of tradition, it can become a bit more abstract. I've decided I want the bodies to have markings, different colors, shapes, and tones, which could become a chromatic exploration rather than a cultural one. That's what's happening in these works. It's more of a loosening of that specificity of exactly where on the continent these characters are from and then rooting that into a broader sense of where Black bodies situate themselves through time and space.

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones: Between Motion and Stasis



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones in the studio; photograph: Harry Griffin

6 mins

By Aurella Yussuf

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones' series of watercolour paintings in [Astral Reflections](#) appear as tiny kaleidoscopic portals into another realm. Limbs and faces are camouflaged in organic, fluid shapes – an arm here, a foot there, an eye peeking out from a dense configuration of watercolour and acrylic brushstrokes. Pencil and ink neatly delineates the figures from their lush surroundings, but at times there is distortion from the bleed between adjacent segments of ink and paint, in the same way that a life cannot be compartmentalised from settings and experiences.

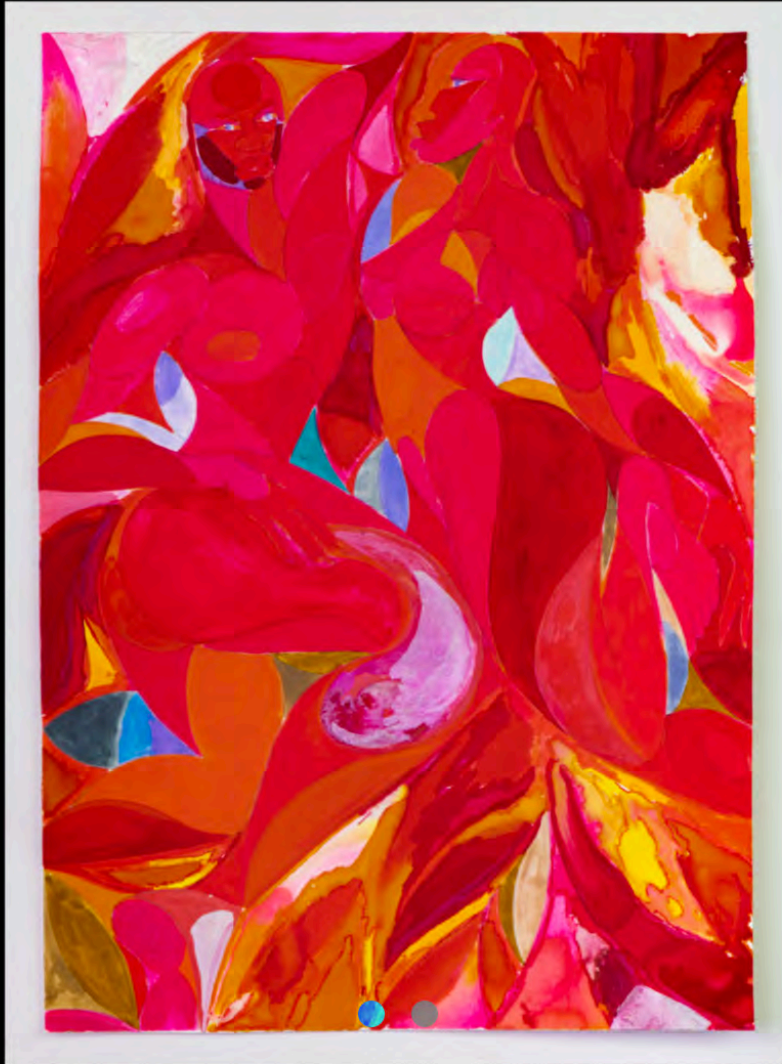


Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, Devotion Ritual, 2021 Watercolour, ink and acrylic © the artist. Courtesy White Cube

Adeniyi-Jones describes spending most of the last eighteen months in periods of 'stasis'. Although based in New York, the artist was accustomed to splitting his time between the US, the UK where he grew up, and Nigeria where his family origins lie. The Covid pandemic abruptly interrupted the relative freedom of travel that was such a characteristic part of his global, diasporic identity.

Moving through the world became a discontinuous, laboured process, with many phases of delay and even standstill. This forced stillness has slowed his pace and required the artist to turn his gaze inward, and in doing so his work has become deeply rich and complex. The 'reflections' in the title suggest an act of interiority, the process of facing one-self, signalling the artist's emotional journey all whilst not fully revealing himself.

Recalling being stuck in isolation in a hotel room in Mexico, Adeniyi-Jones sat with his paintings for longer than he usually would, reworking pieces that in another time he would have discarded. 'Two Red Figures Interweaving' (2021) is textured with the pilling of paper that has been scraped, markings that reflect an attempt at erasure, leaving behind the presence of old wounds or memories.



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, Two Red Figures interweaving
2021 Watercolour, ink and acrylic © the artist.
Courtesy White Cube

There is a looseness to these works, which is not a complete departure, but a development and progression of his practice. Earlier works such as 'Pattern Makers' (2019) and 'Bird Charmer' (2019) feel very rooted in a physical location, drawing on Nigerian classical history; while the figures in 'A Flashy Encounter' appear to exist beyond this earthly plane. The definition of the word astral is twofold: first, relating to the stars, second, relating to a non-physical realm of existence. Adeniyi-Jones tells me that he is "creating an elusive space rather than trying to articulate a specific foliage and setting", and in doing so blurs the lines between specificity and universality.

The pandemic was not the only event of significance in recent years for Adeniyi-Jones. In early 2020, a residency at Black Rock in Dakar, Senegal gave the artist a sense of space and freedom to release some of the expectations – external ones as well as his own – of what his art should be or should represent. Increasingly it is not a necessity to assert a prescribed Nigerian identity through his work – by subject or by signifiers – the specificity arises out of an authentic expression of self.



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones Astral Reflections, 2021 Six plate aquatint etching with soft ground and spit bite on white Somerset Satin paper © the artist. Courtesy White Cube, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, NY, Mórán Mórán Gallery, LA and Wingate Studio, New Hampshire; Photograph: courtesy of the artist

The titular work, an aquatint etching in which nine androgynous figures the colour of lapis lazuli sway, leap and writhe against a vivid tangerine backdrop; from a distance it is almost like staring at the blue light flickering in the centre of a flame. In many of the watercolours there is an ambiguous tension between the figures who are almost never alone, but in pairs or groups of three. Adeniyi-Jones captures their interactions at the precipice of embracing or coming to blows. He tells me that they are deliberately confrontational, and yet they are utterly alluring.

The series of monotype prints, 'Magenta', 'Blue' and 'Red Reflection' (2021), dominate the rear gallery wall with their size, precision and spontaneity. At first glance they recall the Blue Nudes created by Henri Matisse in the late years of his career. Yet the work of Matisse and modernist peers is deeply entangled with the African artworks by which they were influenced, and even imitated, despite their unwillingness to acknowledge this.



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, Red Reflection, Blue Reflection, Magenta Reflection 2021 Monotypes in oil paint on white Somerset Satin paper © the artist. Courtesy Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, Ny and Mórán Mórán Gallery, LA. Photograph: James Bellorini © The Charleston Trust

Adeniyi-Jones finds inspiration in the work of Ben Enwonwu, particularly his development of a distinct and unique visual language that floats between figuration and abstraction. We can find echoes of the Nigerian master's sculptures in Adeniyi's work – the elongated faces and limbs, and their uncanny ability to be subtly expansive and expressive. They are elusive and enticing, playing a game with us. There is also an affinity with the work of Yussuf Grillo, in the way they both play with perceptions of light. As well as working in paint, the late Grillo created many stained glass windows, installed in churches across Nigeria. Here, Adeniyi-Jones' combined use of a defined colour palette and metallic details hint at light being refracted.

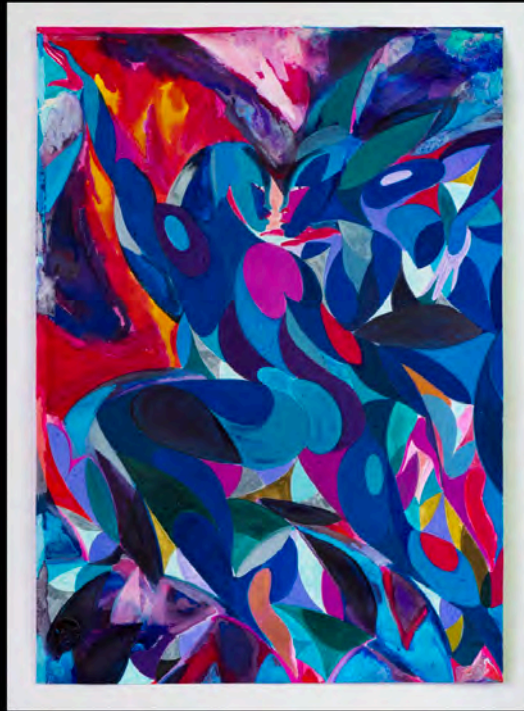
Reading this as a direct influence from artists of one generation to another is too simplistic. Conceptions of time and of being vary in different philosophies across the African continent, but one commonality is that the linear understanding of time and progress that defines 'modernity' is a distinctly European way of thinking. Adeniyi-Jones is reaching for something much more intangible with this collapsing of space and time, exterior and interior, cosmic and human. His journey into himself is a reminder that sometimes everything we need already exists inside of us.

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones: Astral Reflections', open now until 13 March 2022.

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Aurella Yussuf is a writer and art historian, focusing on the work of Black artists in Britain and beyond.

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones: The Influence of Ben Enwonwu and West African Modernism



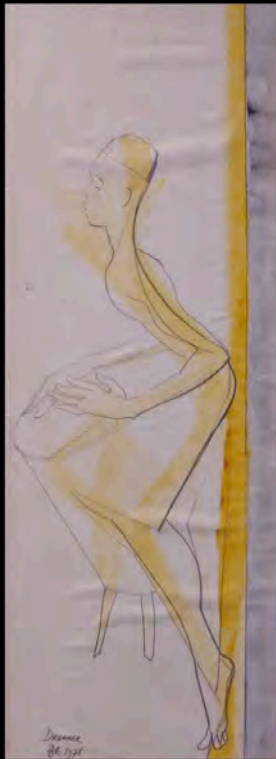
Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, 'A Flashy Encounter', 2021.
Photograph: courtesy of the artist

6 mins

By Alayo Akinkugbe

Displayed as part of Tunji Adeniyi-Jones' current exhibition at Charleston, 'Astral Reflections', a small selection of works by a pioneer of West African modernism, Ben Enwonwu (1917-1994), explore the influence of the artist on Adeniyi-Jones' contemporary work and the connections between them.

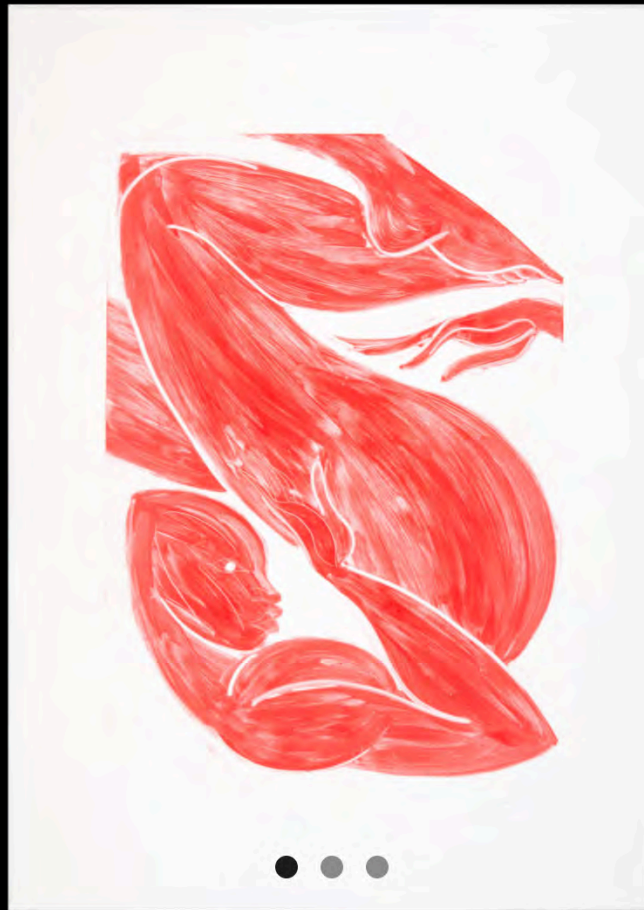
Enwonwu was an internationally celebrated artist in his lifetime and is best known for having developed a unique form of Nigerian modernism. Adeniyi-Jones cites Enwonwu as a continuous source of inspiration. This influence is clear in Enwonwu's painting 'The Drummer', from 1978, as well as two of his untitled sculptures. They're displayed alongside Adeniyi-Jones' paintings and prints of similarly fluid and sinuous figures, depicted in striking, vivid colour palettes – blocks of saturated orange, blue and red hues recur across the works.



Ben Enwonwu, *The Drummer*, 1978. Watercolour and pencil on paper. Collection TAFETA;
Photograph: James Bellorini © The Charleston Trust

The title of the exhibition, in the words of the artist, 'speaks to the physical and emotional fragments that we gather and leave behind through continued travel and transition.' Like Ben Enwonwu decades before him, Adeniyi-Jones experienced a British education in fine art, from the perspective of a Nigerian. Both of the artists studied at the Ruskin School of Art at the University of Oxford. Enwonwu studied there temporarily while the Slade was relocated during the Second World War and Adeniyi-Jones went on to study at Yale for his MFA.

The notion of fragmentation and transition in this exhibition corresponds with Adeniyi-Jones' interest in the 'cultural crossovers between European art and West African art'. Enwonwu explored this in his own practice, using his British education to develop a kind of modern art that would divert from European ideals of modernism.



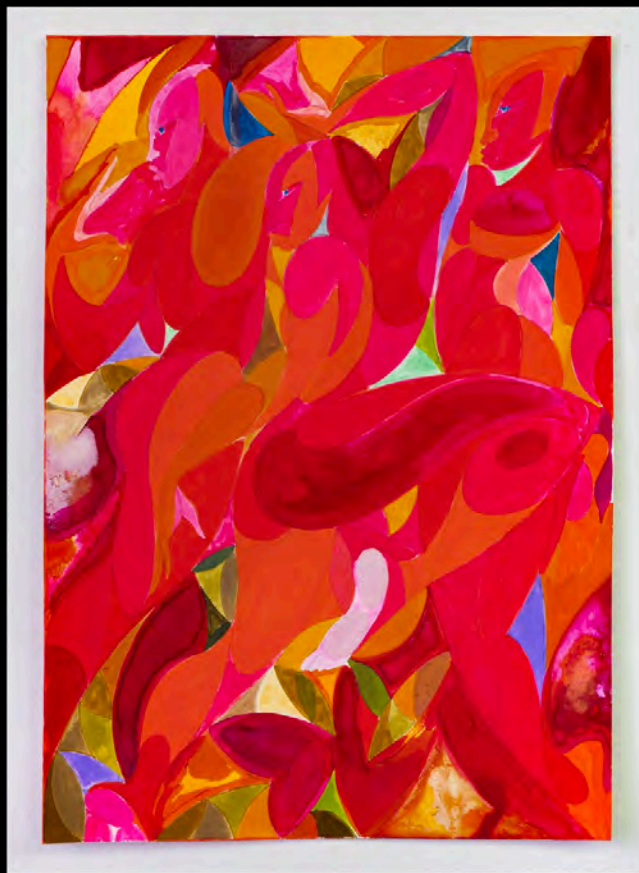
Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, Red Reflection, 2021,
Monotype in oil paint on paper © the artist.
Courtesy Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, Ny and...

Adeniyi-Jones has described Enwonwu's work as an 'extensive guide' and explained that he 'feel[s] honoured to be able to expand upon the themes that he originated throughout the 20th century'. Experiencing the work of these artists side-by-side in this exhibition demonstrates the great extent to which Enwonwu's work acts as a springboard for Adeniyi-Jones' electrifying prints and paintings.

His series of 'Reflections', named 'Blue Reflection' or 'Magenta Reflection' for example, mirror the fluidity with which Enwonwu delineates his figures, as you can see in his painting 'The Drummer'. Adeniyi-Jones' figures, in many cases, are accentuated by backgrounds that consist of curvilinear forms, for example in 'Three Red Figures Rising', which increase the dynamism and sense of rhythm that the figures have in their contorted, sinuous positions.

Like Enwonwu's painting of the drummer, Adeniyi-Jones' works have a rhythmic, almost sonic effect. This is significant when considering the importance of sound and music in indigenous Nigerian cultural and religious spheres.

As well as the aesthetic similarities between the works by these two artists, both engage with spiritual and religious themes. The faces of Adeniyi-Jones' figures, like Enwonwu's, also show the influence of West African mask-making traditions. The aesthetic similarities between the incised faces of Enwonwu's wooden sculptures in the exhibition and those of Adeniyi-Jones' figures speak to a shared interest in the indigenous artistic traditions of Nigeria.



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, *Three Red Figures Rising*, 2021, Watercolour, ink and acrylic © the artist.
Courtesy White Cube



Ben Enwonwu, *Untitled I and II*, 1980s. Wood. Collection TAFETA; Photograph: James Bellorini © The Charleston Trust

Being Igbo, Enwonwu introduced Igbo iconography into his work. His engagement with indigenous Igbo motifs, such as in his 1940s 'Mmuo' series which preceded the works on display in this exhibition, shows how the artist synthesised a Western style of figuration with Igbo iconography.

By engaging with indigenous spirituality and motifs at the time, Enwonwu's work directly opposed the British colonial agenda which dismissed pre-colonial religious practices as "juju" or "evil", in favour of popularising Christianity in the region. It was his creative resistance to the iconoclasm of indigenous Nigerian cultures.

Being Yoruba, Adeniyi-Jones similarly draws on aspects of indigenous religion. 'I draw a great deal of inspiration from my Yoruba ancestry and heritage,' he said, 'Although I don't practise the religion, there are many religious aspects to my paintings.' He also refers to other indigenous West African religious practices in his works, citing Bwa (a society native to Burkina Faso) and Baule (one of the largest ethnicities in Ivory Coast) masks as influencing some of his figures.



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones *Astral Reflections*, 2021 Six plate aquatint etching with soft ground and spit bite on white Somerset Satin paper © the artist. Courtesy White Cube, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, NY, Mórán Mórán Gallery, LA and Wingate Studio, New Hampshire; Photograph: courtesy of the artist

Adeniyi-Jones' work in 'Astral Reflections' is shown parallel to an exhibition of works from 1920 by Bloomsbury group artist, Duncan Grant, who moved to Charleston in 1916. Over a century ago, Grant employed a similarly vibrant colour palette. In his paintings, the same tendency towards a fluid, curvilinear depiction of the human form can also be seen.

Similarities can be noticed particularly between Adeniyi-Jones' works and Grant's '*Venus and Adonis*' from 1919, in which the large figure of Venus occupies most of the canvas like in Adeniyi-Jones' series of '*Reflections*'. Echoing a number of Adeniyi-Jones' watercolours in the exhibition, Grant's depiction of Venus is enveloped within a background of blocks of vibrant colour.



Duncan Grant, 'Venus and Adonis' c.1919, oil on canvas. Tate Collection. Copyright: Estate of Duncan Grant; photograph: Tate

This exhibition of Adeniyi-Jones' work alongside three works by Enwonwu provides a unique opportunity to explore the connections and interplay between the artists. We can better understand the work of Adeniyi-Jones as a response to a specific style of modernist figuration which has greatly influenced his practice.

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Alayo Akinkugbe is a writer and art historian. She founded the Instagram account, [@ABlackHistoryOfArt](https://www.instagram.com/ABlackHistoryOfArt).

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.

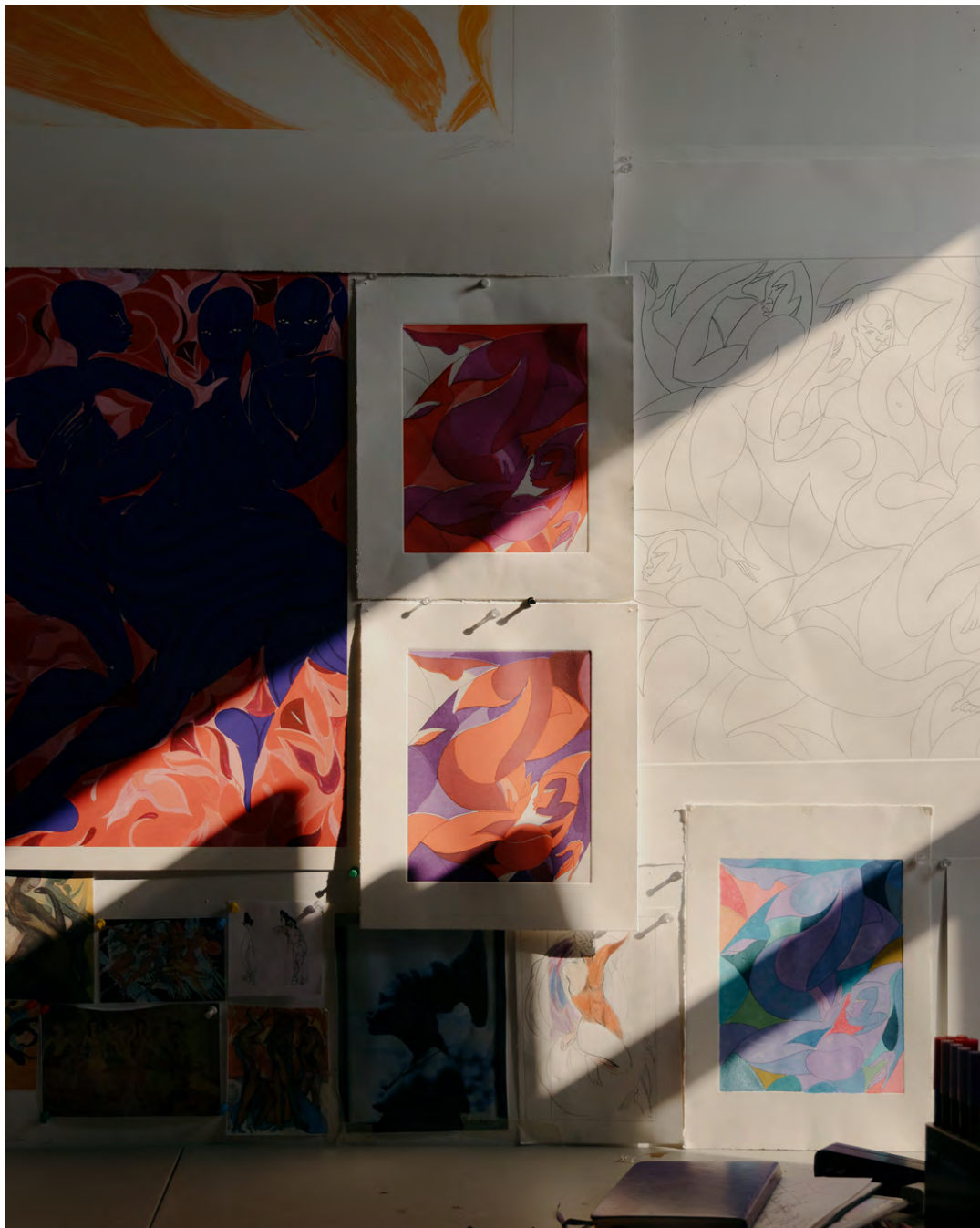
ENUMA OKORO | 09.20.2021 | PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM JESS LAIRD



TUNJI ADENIYI-JONES IN THE STUDIO.

CULTURED

“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.

CULTURED

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.”

CULTURED

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.”

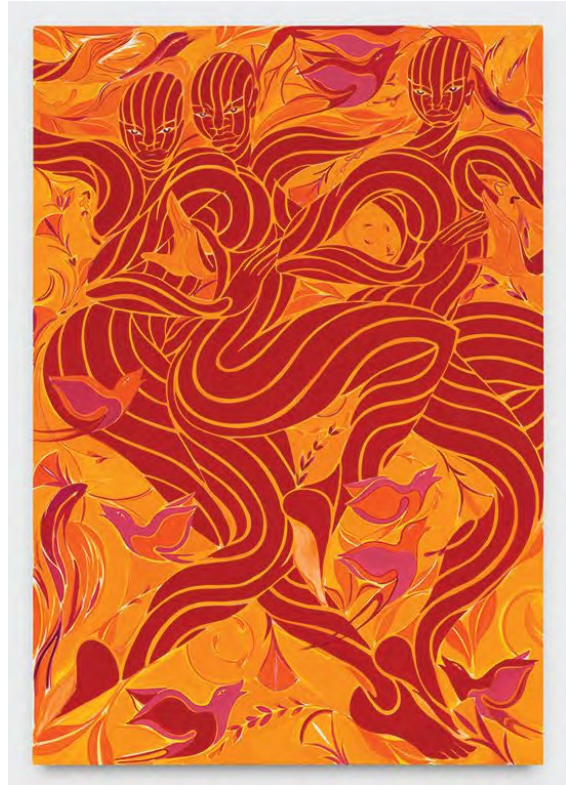
Pérez Art Museum Miami renames endowment fund for Black art to reflect the wider diaspora

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.

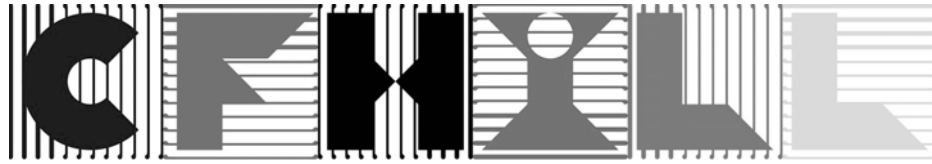
You were raised by Nigerian parents in the UK, then moved to the United States to study. How have you encountered different kinds of blackness?

“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.”*

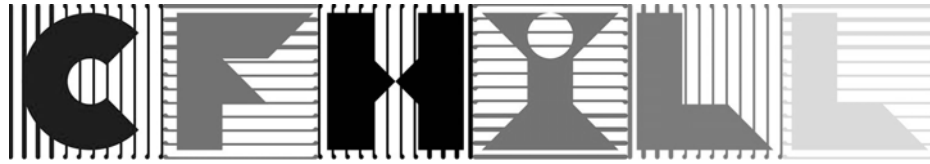
Tunji Adeniyi-Jones uses figurative painting as a means to explore West African history and its associated mythology. Adeniyi-Jones renders colourful and vibrant bodies that are larger than life, taking inspiration from both his Yoruba heritage and his British upbringing.

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?

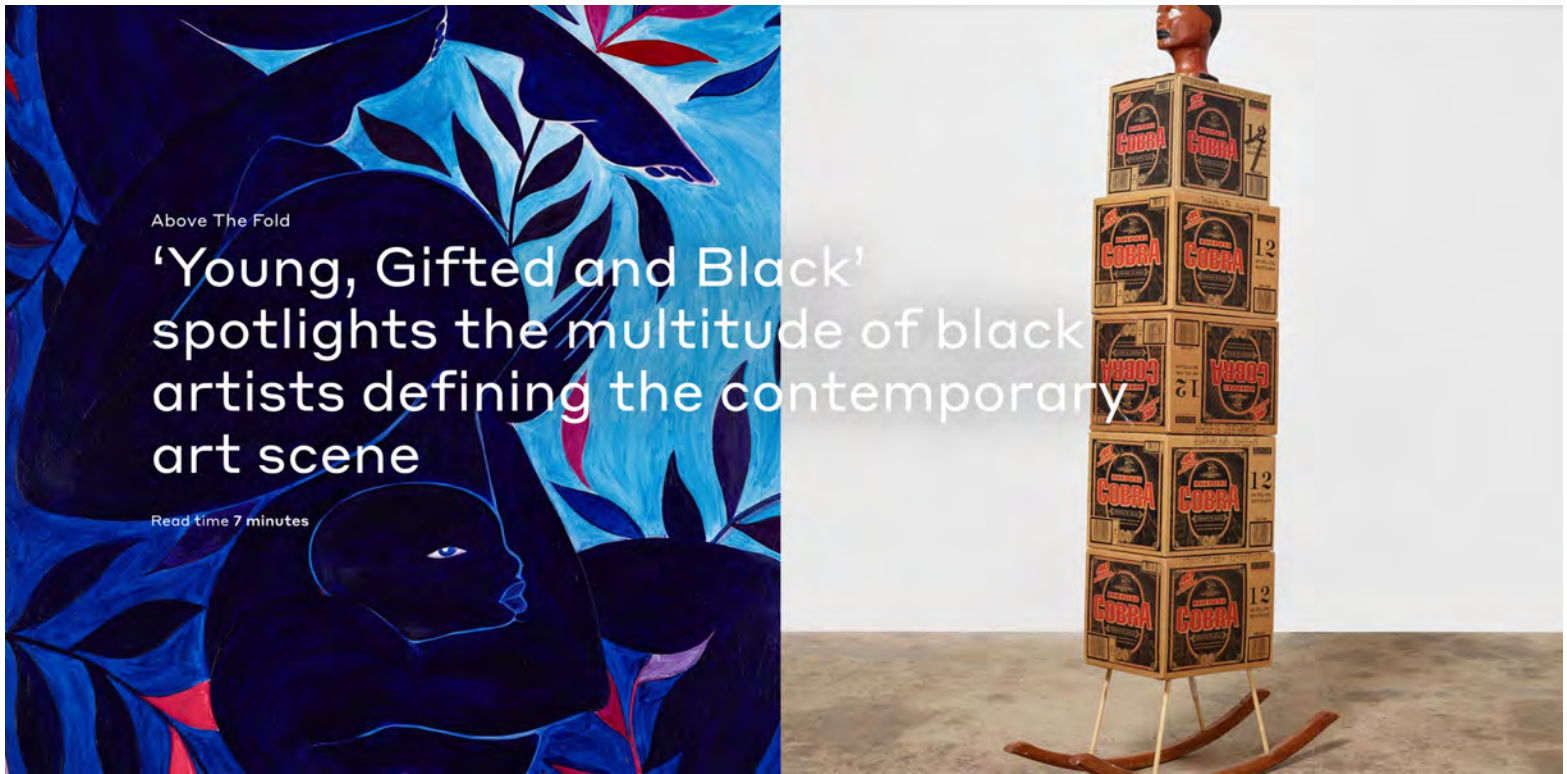
— I'm really interested in West African history and mythology. I draw a great deal of inspiration from my Yoruba heritage, and I try to incorporate as many of these traditional customs as possible into my work. I'm fascinated by the ways in which longstanding traditions can still bear relevance to the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

DOCUMENT



Text by Miss Rosen | March 17, 2020

Artist Tunji Adeniyi-Jones and collector Bernard Lumpkin discuss inclusivity and the evolving relationship between artists and institutions

Fifty years ago, Nina Simone released “To Be Young, Gifted and Black,” a song written in memory of her dear friend, the playwright Lorraine Hansberry who died in 1965 at the tender age of 34. It became an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement that soon found its way into a 1972 episode of Sesame Street. Simone sang, “We must begin to tell our young / There’s a world waiting for you / This is a quest that’s just begun” to Gen X babies, who took the message to heart and paid it forward to the children of Generation Z, who fearlessly stand at the forefront of a brave new world.

With the Black Lives Matter movement centering issues of race in the discourse, the historically exclusionary art world has finally made space for Black Art. A wealth of established, mid-career, and emerging artists are breaking new ground, be it at auction houses, major museum exhibitions, on magazine covers, or with new books. Yet Black Art is far from a trend; it has informed the world for thousands of years in various incarnations in Africa and across the diaspora.

DOCUMENT

This point is beautifully illustrated in the exhibition *Young Gifted and Black: The Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art*, which pairs collector Bernard Lumpkin with critic Antwaun Sargent to curate a masterful showcase of some of the most innovative and influential contemporary black artists. The exhibition is a symphony of voices and visions from across generations all around the globe, creating a mellifluous confluence of style, media, and subject matter. Culled from the Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection, *Young, Gifted and Black* features works by David Hammons, Glenn Ligon, Kerry James Marshall, Henry Taylor, Mickalene Thomas, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Sadie Barnette, Jordan Casteel, Jonathan Lyndon Chase, Deana Lawson, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, and Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, whose work appears on the cover of the catalog. Here, Lumpkin and Adeniyi-Jones discuss how when the collector and artist work together, they can transform the narrative of identity, politics, education, and art history.

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones: [Black Art] is an incredible movement to be a part of and see it manifest. It makes me and several of my colleagues and friends feel validated and motivated to keep working. It's almost like we've been chosen for this moment. It's a wonderful thing to watch happen, to take part in, to collaborate with collectors like Bernard. We were introduced in a studio visit during my first year at Yale. From there we had a series of repeat visits and it's been a great relationship. It feels like you are working alongside each other towards something when you have that level of familiarity, comfort, learning, mutual interest, and confidence.

Bernard Lumpkin: It's exciting to see a conversation about diversity, equity, and inclusion, and how to better represent art history, how to tell a fuller, more inclusive story of contemporary art that has been brewing among curators and museum directors spill out. That conversation has resulted in the hiring of more curators of color, more women curators, the recruitment of more people of color to museum boards where the decisions around exhibitions and acquisitions happen. I always tell collectors that collecting work is the price of admission to something much larger if you want to embrace it. It's a community. There is work to be done that can make a difference to the life of artists now and in the future.

Tunji: It's important for people to understand the breadth and scope of blackness, the black identity, and the black experience. I think the tendency before this incredible, prolific moment has been to broadly categorize all Black Art as being one singular thing. What's cool when you have a collection like this on display is that it includes such a vast array of artists coming from different backgrounds in that space of blackness—it's amazing to see it all together in one place. That's similar to what I experienced during my residency in Senegal [as part of the inaugural year at Kehinde Wiley's Black Rock in Dakar]. It's a fuller understanding of the multiplicity of the experience.

DOCUMENT

Bernard: The strongest collections are ones that showcase the vision of the collector. For me, the focus comes from a personal place: my family and stories having to do with my father being African American and my mother being Sephardic Jewish from Morocco, as well as the experience of being mixed race. I had been collecting art but not with the focus on artists of color. Then my father became sick with cancer and I was spending a lot of time with him. He told me stories about his family, growing up in Watts, wanting to be a scientist and make his way in the world. I became interested in bringing that conversation back into my work, especially after my father had passed away.

Tunji: Being in a collection like this gives me hope. As a first-generation British born Nigerian coming from London, you don't see as many close and invested collector-artist relationships as you do here. It's a special reassuring feeling that is incredibly encouraging, inspiring and very helpful. [I met gallerist Nicelle Beauchene through Bernard]. We all looked at each other like, 'We trust this other person so it will all work out very well.' Things rarely fall into place like that, and the results have been incredible.

Bernard: The art world has many different roles and people, and I always am reassured and gratified when an artist I believe in connects with a dealer, a curator, or another collector who will support the artist. That's a positive part of the Black Art moment that we're in. One of the things I have learned from Thelma Golden, Director of the Studio Museum where I'm on the board, is how for many years before museums, gallerists, curators, and auction houses were laying out the welcome mat to black artists, there was a network of collectors who took it upon themselves to steward and preserve the work, telling these artists' stories, and setting the stage for the moment we're in now. For many people, it's a Black Art moment but the reality is artists like Alma Thomas and Howardina Pindell have made work and had collectors for a long time; now the larger art world is coming to the party.

Tunji: Accessibility is a really important thing to address in the art world. To have that opportunity to see emerging artists in the early stage of their career in conversation with mid- and late-career artists—that curation and that dialogue has the potential to be life-changing. I would have loved to see a show like this in college.

Bernard: My father was a professor and my mother was a teacher, so education has always been a part of what people do in my family. It wasn't enough for me to be a collector and enjoy it for myself. The collection had to have a larger focus and impact. When it came down to planning this exhibition, I took it upon myself to say, 'Why don't I use this as an opportunity to bring the art to people in places that might not otherwise get to see it?' People can come and see themselves on the wall, whatever your background is.

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.

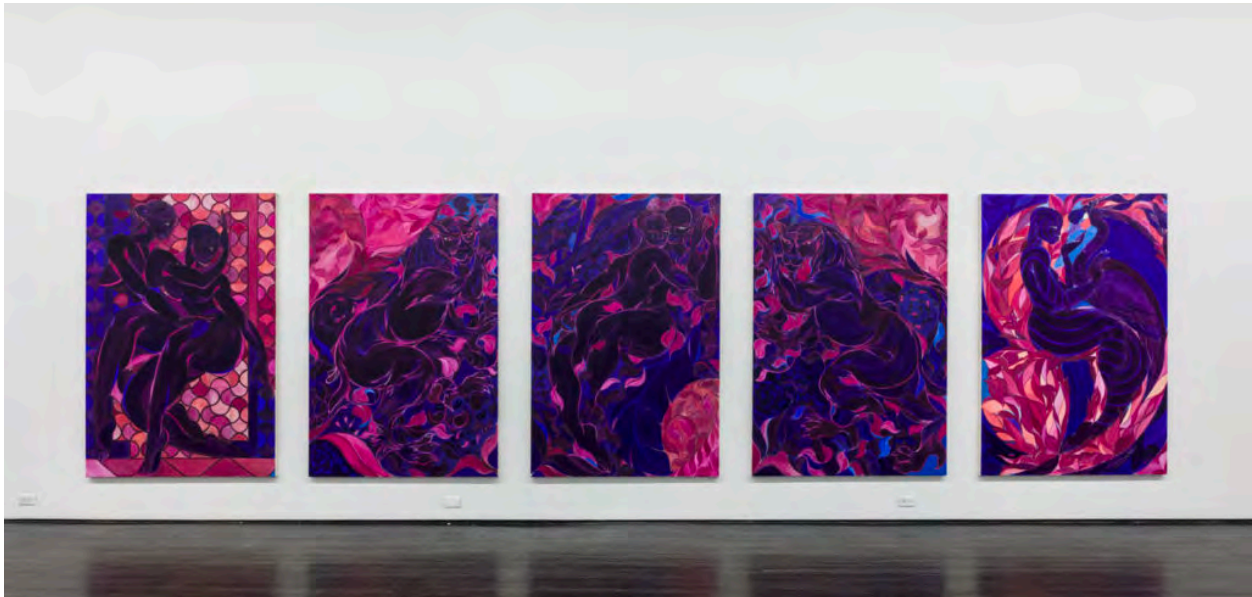
To help you navigate the influx of art, we've highlighted a group of up-and-coming talents to look out for—each with eye-catching work, critical and curatorial buzz, and a

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.

ARTFORUM

NEWS

ARTISTS SELECTED FOR KEHINDE WILEY'S INAUGURAL RESIDENCY PROGRAM IN SENEGAL

July 23, 2019



Black Rock Senegal, located on the coast in Yoff Virage, Dakar, 2019.

Black Rock Senegal, the residency program launched by artist Kehinde Wiley earlier this year, announced today that sixteen multidisciplinary artists have been invited to live and work in Dakar from August to April 2020. In addition to receiving room and board, the artists have access to individual studio space and will be given a stipend for supplies and other incidentals.

The participants were selected from more than seven hundred applicants by a committee comprising artist and producer Swizz Beatz; Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem; Thomas Lax, curator of performance and media art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; Christine Riding, head of the curatorial department at the National Gallery in London; and artists Mickalene Thomas and Carrie Mae Weems.

“I discovered Dakar on a layover in 1997, back when Air Afrique was the sole provider of flights from the west to Nigeria,” Wiley said when he conceived of the program in March. “It was my first visit to Africa and I was immediately enraptured by Senegalese language, food, art, culture, and tradition.”

He added: “Black Rock stands as the direct answer to my desire to have an uncontested relationship with Africa, the filling in of a large void that I share with many African Americans. With this project I wanted to explore my own personal relationship with Africa while inviting artists to do the same and to galvanize the growing artistic and creative energies that exist in Africa in an increasing measure with the addition of diverse, international, creative possibility.”

The artists-in-residence are as follows:

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones (United Kingdom)

Laurence Bonvin (Switzerland)

Sonya Clark (United States)

Yagazie Emezi (Nigeria)

Nona Faustine (United States)

Devin B. Johnson (United States)

Heather Jones (United States)

Grace Lynne (United States)

Zanoxolo Sylvester Mqeku (South Africa)

Kelechi Njoku (Nigeria)

Chelsea Odufu (United States)

Kambui Olujimi (United States)

Zohra Opoku (Ghana)

Rafael RG (Brazil)

Tajh Rust (United States)

Ytasha Womack (United States)



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 milieus 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".

-Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

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.

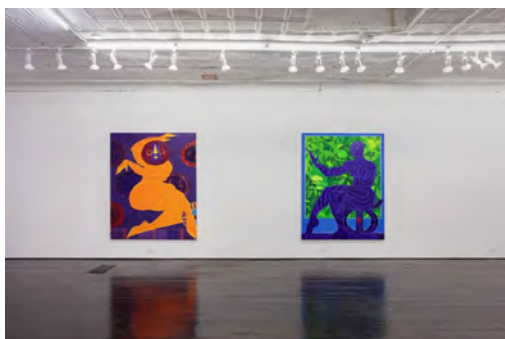
Seph Rodney | 2 days ago



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 “Red Twins” (2016) oil on canvas, 60 x 56 inches

[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.](#)

Artful Giving

Who wouldn't love to find a work of art under the tree? Jam-packed with galleries, New York offers something at almost any price for the art enthusiast on your list (or for yourself). Besides, it doesn't cost anything to look.

(1) With over 50 works, "Ardent Nature: Arshile Gorky Landscapes, 1943-47" is a gift for aficionados of the groundbreaking artist, whose enigmatic Surrealism prefigured Abstract Expressionism. Inspired by summers spent on a farm, lyrical paintings like "Pastoral" (1947) show how Gorky (1904-1948) liberated himself from artistic conventions. **Hauser & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St., 212.794.4970, thru Dec. 23**

(2) Can't spring for a grand-scale flower sculpture by art's indomitable 88-year-old Japanese polymath Yayoi Kusama (pictured in her studio)? Join the line for a selfie with or without a friend in her hallucinatory "Infinity Mirror Rooms" during the

exhibit "Festival of Life," which spills through two Chelsea galleries. **David Zwirner, 525 & 533 W. 19th sts., thru Dec. 16**

(3) Collecting work by younger artists lets you watch a career develop and often sidestep stratospheric prices. In "HotSpots," his first New York solo show, Los Angeles artist Brian Rochefort unveils irresistibly tactile ceramic "craters," including "Chumbe" (2017). Rochefort's travels to volcanoes, rain forests and barrier reefs inspired these bold sculptures that blast past traditional ceramics. **Van Doren Waxter, 195 Chrystie St., 212.982.1930, thru Dec. 22**

(4) Born into a Yoruba family in London, Tunji Adeniyi-Jones is fascinated by the enduring influence of ancient West African aesthetic traditions on present-day diasporic communities. In "Flash of the Spirit," the 25-year-old New York artist creates his own mythologies of ancient royalty and Yoruba deities in vibrant, color-field paintings like "Red Twins" (2016). **Nicelle Beauchene, 327 Broome St., 212.375.8043, thru Dec. 17**



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PHOTOS: ARSHILE GORKY, "PASTORAL," COURTESY THE ARSHILE GORKY FOUNDATION AND HAUSER & WIRTH, FORKHOFF; YAYOI KUSAMA, "PASTORAL," COURTESY DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK; CONTEMPORARY ARTS, TOKYO; BRIAN ROCHEFORT, "CHUMBE," 2017, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VAN DOREN WAXTER; TUNJI ADENIYI-JONES, "RED TWINS," 2016, COURTESY THE ARTIST

10 Art Events to Attend in New York City This Week

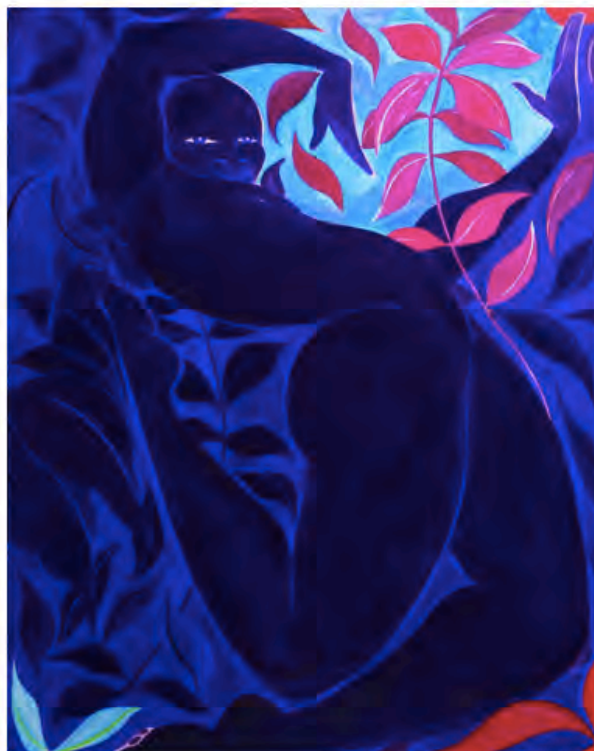
BY *The Editors of ARTnews* POSTED 11/13/17 1:58 PM

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 16

Opening: Tunji Adeniyi-Jones at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

Robert Farris Thompson's 1984 book *Flash of the Spirit* investigated the influence of West African aesthetic traditions on diasporic communities. With that in mind, New York-based artist Tunji Adeniyi-Jones borrowed the book's title for his first exhibition at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery. Born into a Yoruba family and grew up in London, Adeniyi-Jones creates paintings that combine the traditions of English portraiture with abstract motifs and rich colors that reference objects and styles often associated with West African culture. This exhibition will feature a new series of work that centers around a mythological kingdom and its attendant heirs.

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, 327 Broome Street, 6–8 p.m.



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, *Blue Dancer*, 2017, oil on canvas.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY

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.