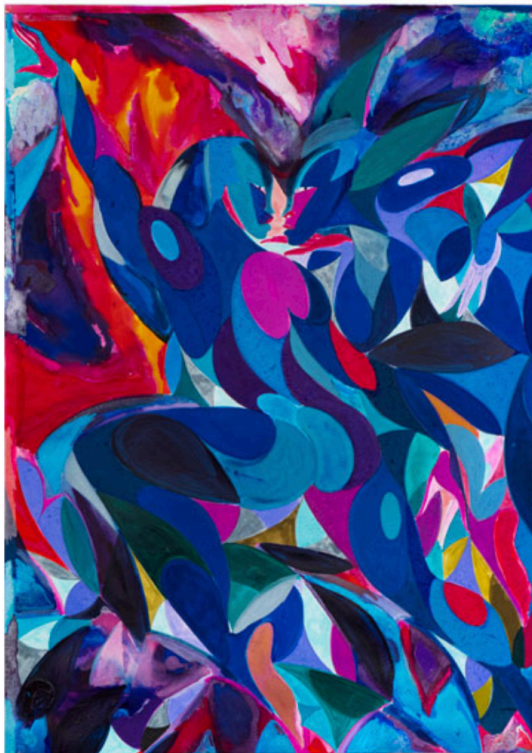


New Additions: Tunji Adeniyi-Jones

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 × 11/2 in.

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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.

