

Toyin Ojih Odutola

- Nigerian, b. 1985 in Ile-Ife
- 2012 MFA California College of the Arts, San Francisco; 2008 BA University of Alabama, Huntsville
- Lives and works in New York
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Body of work

Of Nigerian descent, Toyin Ojih Odutola moved to San Francisco where her father taught at the University of California, Berkeley, when she was 5 years old and then her family settled in Alabama four years later. In her recent work, she developed a seemingly plausible narrative with fictional portraits chronicling the lives of two aristocratic Nigerian families. The worlds they inhabit are informed by the artist's own array of inspirations, ranging from art history to popular culture to experiences of migration and dislocation. The artist's choices are a statement and decision to self-determination and, through their representation, bring into reality a hopeful present. Ojih Odutola's subjects are itinerant, cosmopolitan and, while intentionally not recognizable, drawn partially from her own inner circle, some sourced from the internet or books. Ojih Odutola places individuals and couples in opulent interiors and rich landscapes, at leisure and in social interactions. Architectural details and objects surrounding her subjects receive equal attention, although the mark making is noticeably different. She stated in a 2015 interview, "I always think of my work in terms of landscape, because it's plains, hills, and valleys. There's a sculptural element, a tactility to it. The textures, to me, are landscapes."

Ojih Odutola had work featured in recent solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Savannah College of Art and Design's Museum of Art, Georgia; Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis; Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art; and Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire. She has participated in several group shows at Jack Shainman Gallery, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Seattle Art Museum; Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Connecticut; Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco; Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City; and the Menil Collection, Houston. Ojih Odutola's work is in private collections as well as public collections including the Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama; The National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Baltimore Museum of Art; New Orleans Museum of Art; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Honolulu Museum of Art; Princeton University Art Museum; and the University of Kansas, Spencer Museum of Art.



2014, *Birmingham* (left, middle, right), four-color lithograph with gold leaf, Spencer Museum of Art

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Toyin Ojih Odutola creates conceptual portraits of fictional figures through drawing media. Her earliest images emphasized the dimensionality of Black skin with a highly distinctive approach to intricately rendering Black bodies in ballpoint ink pen, as we see in 2012 *Was it All for Naught?*. In a 2014 mixed media work, *What She Saw*, with charcoal, pastel, marker and graphite, Odutola presents a female figure in a state of alarm or frenzy. While her hair and blouse remain the scant elements of realism in the picture, her body and visage relay a heightened sense of emotionality. The figure's furrowed brow suggests a sense of disarray, as if the figure is witnessing a kind of perturbation. The work's title plays on notions of scene, seeing and being seen, doubling the gaze of onlookers and that of the central figure, and obscuring the cause of her figure's consternation. Yet it is the epidermis here that reveals any kind of psychic and visual discord.

The artist has described skin not as a static given or biological fact, but as ever-shifting landscapes our eyes and minds travel through, like terrain to be mapped or traversed. "The skin can be so many things, in parts and as a whole," the artist once recalled in an interview. Odutola's work is inextricably linked to her experiences as a young girl emigrating from Nigeria to California and then the American South, navigating the complex nature of intersectional identities often held in contradistinction to one another. Her conceptual drawings of figures with fantastical skins became fertile ground to mine the psycho-geographic potential of skin, using it as a technology to explore subjective, interpersonal, social and psychological implications of embodied experiences of Blackness.

It can contradict itself: it can be sharp and specific in places, nebulous and unreliable in others...because it's landscape. The feeling of it...is landscape... From there came the conceptual; your skin defines you, it can be a guide for you and enlighten you; yet it can also stifle and make movement in certain contexts difficult or impossible. It's the result of a variety of factors, but if the context itself is the very place you live in and that place is on your body, how does one capture a person and that feeling?ⁱ

Odutola's drawings intervene within a deep historical engagement of the figurative tradition, from Lucian Freud, to John Singer Sargent, to Kerry James Marshall. Odutola toggles between an abstract approach to skin and verisimilitude, emphasizing the live-ness and spectatorial charge of skin. The artist's signature multidirectional hash marks almost appear like muscular tissue in their luminescence and tightness. Odutola's characters often emerge from no interior or conventional negative space, but through the iridescence and tonalities of blue-black skin, with winding refractions of light in unconventional colors. In *LTS XI* (2014) the bodies of two male figures against a geometric backdrop almost merge together in a uniformity of surface and texture.

Across her practice, Odutola's stylistic choices are wide-ranging, culling material from Japanese anime, graphic novels, fashion design, archival photographs and historical portraits. More recently, her work has seen a wealth of transformations. *Surveying the Family Seat* (2017) and *Gap Year* (2017) are part of a trilogy series of large-scale pastel, pencil, marker and charcoal drawings that center narratives around two fictional Nigerian families. These works envision an unfolding family saga set in a backdrop where her home country of Nigeria was left unfettered from European colonialist enterprise. Not unlike her imaginative portraits, Odutola affords the Black subjects in these vignettes with narrative possibility and expansiveness. In *Gap Year* (2017) a young woman rests in a menagerie of interior and exterior space. The artist has tilted

our perspective as viewers; her subject sits as if in a daydream. Odotola tilts the architectural integrity of her picture so that we see a glimpse of the young woman. She is enveloped within between the inside and outside world, and we see her with the speed of a passing moment. This image is very much about luxuriating in time, a rare departure for Black diasporic subjects whose stories are often defined by precarity. *Surveying the Family Seat* offers its central male figure a partially-guarded view, askance from the gaze of onlookers. He scans the rich winding hilly terrain behind him, echoing the tributaries of lines in his navy pinstriped trousers. He has the accoutrement of wealth, from the heavy gold rings adorning his fingers, to the assuredness and comfortability of his stance as he gazes forward at landscape, likely his own inherited property. What would it mean to be in ownership of one's body, one's selfhood, one's capital? Odotola asks of viewers. Her world making bequeaths Black subjects the right to a range of human experiences, in particular the right to opacity, to complexity, to be both unremarkable and contemplative, to be comfortable in their own skin, and, even, outside of it.

- Jessica Bell Brown, art historian, New York

ⁱ "Toyin Ojih Odotola And Claudia Rankine in Conversation," *The Treatment* by Toyin Ojih Odotola, Jack Shainman Gallery and Anteism Publishing, 2017, p.19