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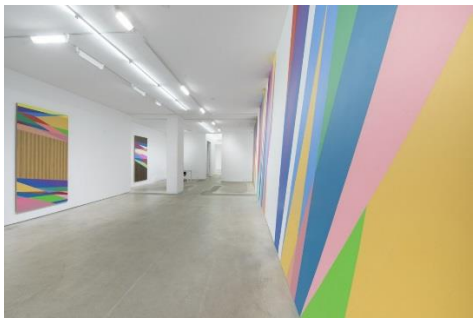
Nigerian-born and Philadelphia-based artist Odili Donald Odita's work presents a fascinating dichotomy and works in two distinct but complimentary ways. In one sense, they are beautiful, bright, and colorful efforts of fabulous design, once described by Janet Koplos as "showstoppers" in Art in America . His large-scale abstract paintings are beautiful and utterly impossible to dismiss. But once the painting has you, its rich use of colors and meticulously designed and drawn lines speak to you. There is a message and a story within the work. Employing a technique he describes as "thought-provoking colors," Donald believes that all colors form personal associations. Through the contrast of colors, a narrative can be formed, much in the same way as Jazz music uses contrasting notes to thread a mood and a story. "What does this color remind you of," Odita asks. "Did you ever see that color somewhere and what were the circumstances surrounding that encounter? What did it make you think and what did you feel?"

*The Velocity of Change, 2015, acrylic latex wall paint, image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery*

Odita was more or less destined to become an artist, having formed a powerful relationship to fine art as a youth through conversations with his father, a fellow artist. After receiving his MFA from Bennington College in 1990, Odita entered the art world as both an artist and a critic, writing for Flash Art International and other publications and interviewing future peers such as Frank Bowling and Stanley Whitney. Since 2006, he has shared his approach with young art students as Associate

Professor of Painting at Tyler School of Art. Through his work as a teacher, a critic, and an artist, Donald formed a unique approach to art: equal parts conceptual and spiritual, in a sense. Odita's most recent exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery, *The Velocity of Change* (ended January 31), continued his quest to explore humanity through patterns, structure, and design. Always interested in the African history of textiles, Odita uses color to emphasize the "complexity of the world." "I cannot make a color twice – it can only appear to be the same," says Odita in a quote from the gallery. "This is important to me because it highlights the specificity of differences that exist in the world of people and things."

Odita possesses one of those wonderfully absorbent artist minds that make conversation with him fascinating. Though he is soft-spoken and deeply considerate, he presents absolute conviction in his work and his ideas. He can espouse critical and conceptual art theory and abstract politics in the same breadth as expressing his love for John Coltrane, David Bowie, and comic books. Odita took the time to speak with me about his last exhibition, his conceptual practice, Jazz music, the death of David Bowie, and the narrative possibilities within color.



*The Velocity of Change, 2015, acrylic latex wall paint, image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery*

AL: Do you think that your time as an art critic informed your conceptual practice at all, or that you are more in tune with art history and where you see yourself in it?

Odita: I think it's a combination of teaching for a number of years and my own background. My dad was an artist. My conceptual practice also developed through educating artists, writing about art, and focusing on my own art.

AL: You've discussed the ideas of self versus institution, how a sense of self can be almost false. Are you at all trying to point that out?

Odita: Yeah, most definitely. Media and institution inform us all, and we try to achieve a sense of self. At one point I wanted to use African colors when I was painting and talk about Africa. I know now that that is the most ridiculous idea because how do you define that? Like, American colors? There is the American flag, but another country might use a similar palette for their flag. It's really about understanding how we renew and re-imagine ourselves in the world in a way so that we reach our full potentials. We just have to understand how things are very specific: time, geography, and location. There is no absolute.

*Chasm (2015), acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery*

AL: I know you were at first very interested in the African history of textiles, and things of that nature, but your conceptual practice grew more political and more abstract. Did you always have a political aim?

Odita: The political intent was always there, but they grew. In the late '80s I was looking at the work of artists like Peter Halley and Jeff Koons, and the politics relative to commodity. But I've always liked artists like Agnes Martin, as well, but they were more about the politics of self that came out of abstract expressionism. It's more about a choice running counter to something else or how you'd like to live life: "I don't want to consume," or "I want to be with nature."

On that level, it was there. I dealt more specifically with institutional politics and racism in the late '80s and '90s, and was living in New York in the '90s and experiencing the whole world of identity politics that defined the city at that time.

AL: I know you're very into music, and I can certainly see a connection to music in the spectrum of colors you use and the variety of stories you tell. You can take Jazz music, for instance, and guys like Coltrane, Sun Ra, and Albert Ayler were able to tell amazing stories without ever uttering a word, just using a spectrum of tones. Is that a connection you strive for in fine art?

Odita: Absolutely, I love that. I went to Bennington College and studied with Bill Dixon there, he had a jazz class where we would just listen to records.

*First Light (2015), acrylic latex on panel, image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery*

AL: Wow that must have been an amazing class!

Odita: Yeah, it was intense (laughs). He would teach us how to really listen and realize things like, "This guy is making the sound of chickens from the coop where he grew up, or the sound of traffic." I was recently talking to a friend about late Coltrane. I told him I didn't get it. He told me to listen to North African snake charmer music, not Indian. I listened to that and went, "Oh my god," if you know anything about this music it's all about calming the beast. That is totally what he was talking about [in the music]. This was the music 'Trane made when he stopped using drugs and wanted to enter into a calmer frame of mind.

AL: It was *A Love Supreme* when he first got off heroin?

Odita: Yeah. I'm also really obsessed with David Bowie having passed away. I was shocked going online and realizing how many people LOVED his music. In all these obituaries I read about how this guy helped people embrace the strange within them and to nurture and utilize it. That's music: an emotional and an intellectual way to tap into your spirit.

*Other World (2015), acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery*

AL: I've read you often using the phrase, "thought provoking colors." How do you identify thought provoking colors, is it intuitive?

Odita: Like most things, it's intuitive. I teach a class called "Color Theory" and try to explain to students that color is connected to your personal association and experience with it. I present a situation asking my students what they would feel if men that were wearing orange suits and masks ran into this room. What would you feel and think seeing that situation? Color can create these situations that trigger memories. Same thing if you smell steak and your stomach rumbles if you're hungry. Color is a sense, which means it triggers a physiological reaction.

AL: Right, when you mentioned men in orange jumpsuits I started thinking about ET and Elliot being quarantined. So I start thinking of false imprisonment and isolation. And you have these memories and you know that they trigger something.

Odita: Yeah and then that trigger becomes a part of your history and memories.

*Fissure (2015), acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery*

AL: It certainly works in music, took. I'll hear a Ghostface Killah song and I immediately think of being stoned in my 1994 Corolla in high school with my buddies.

Odita: (Laughs) Exactly.

Odita: If somebody seriously wants to be a painter than it's always a goal to be seen as being able to hang with the big guys and to be a part of a tradition. It's really rewarding to be seen in the same sphere as those you admired. You realize you're working towards that space, but it can be scary to worry about seeming important. If musicians came in thinking they were great and they were only going to make great songs, they won't make a good song. You have to learn to play to be part of a canon.

AL: There is has to be some sense of insecurity to make anything of substance.

Odita: You want to push yourself to be better than yourself. That is art.

AL: Your paintings to me have a dual quality. They have this relation to the environment and they are very noticeable for their bright rich use of culture, but if any single piece catches you attention for any amount of time it draws you into considering the piece conceptually. Looking for a story. It's almost like design meets concept.

Odita: Absolutely. The design thing really comes into play when I consider Italian drawing. Design is drawing. I love Renaissance works and African art and sculptures and I'm looking at the drawings and the significance of these lines. I create these compositions to intensify a relation to space. You even see it in writing when a really strong passage has a sense of space to carry the body into it. The space has to be strong enough to carry the body into it.

AL: Your work appears to have narrative despite its abstraction. Would you say that is accurate?

Odita: The narrative in the work is fascinating to me. I look at other painters I love but I'm not seeing narrative. I love stories. That's why I love music: even when there are no words, you feel a story. I don't know what it is that I'm tapping into.

AL: Despite your work dealing with race and the socio-political landscape, it doesn't feel angry. That's interesting to me because there does seem so much to be angry about. I was curious if you ever find yourself distancing yourself from anger for a more total narrative.

Odita: I admire people like Obama, who had the right to be angry but knows how to stay even. Or think of it like this: a child that was abused that grows into a parent that doesn't abuse their kids. That is an amazing thing. That's a step beyond. They are doing something beyond themselves. But don't get me wrong: I do react sometimes. I was just in Switzerland with my wife, and everyone was talking about Africans like they are only one kind of people. I was getting mad, and wondered why. I realized it was because they were talking about Africans as one type, but everybody is different. My daughter has a Swiss Mom and a Nigerian Dad. Someone will tell her she's black, but she can be whomever she wants and live the way she wants.

AL: It reminds me of the classic example: Malcolm X coming around to the philosophy of Dr. King, or in comic book terms Magneto coming around to the philosophy of

Odita: (laughs) Professor X, yeah! Everyone wants vengeance, but to not indulge vengeance is a testament to strength.

AL: Has what has been going on in the news come in to your conceptual practice?

Odita: I love history. What the Internet originally provided me was a land of opportunity to learn, but now has become a land of commerce. But with twitter, people can and do use the 'net for protest. I was just researching Abbie Hoffman, and he thought everything was jaded in the '80s in the Reagan era and he ended up committing suicide. If he had lived today he would have thought, "Wow." Look at these kids today, they protest everything, and have the right to do it: Black Lives Matter, what's going on around universities. There's an intellectual debate that totally trumps what we had in the '80s and '90s because the understanding of our culture and our reality is evolving.

AL: And the access to information is just better.

Odita: When I see my students, I'm just like, "wow." These kids are doing amazing stuff.

AL: It's good to hear you say that because I am only 28, I am a millennial and people pigeonhole us as an apathetic generation but what I have seen these last few years that just isn't true.

Odita: No it's not true at all. You guys have so many different conditions. I had my parents over for Thanksgiving and my dad was talking about how terrible it would be to be young today.

AL: It's also the first generation where people can do everything right: work hard, study, become an expert at a skill, get all the right degrees, and still grow up and be underpaid until they are 35 years old.

Odita: Absolutely.

AL: I am fascinated by the title of your most recent show, *The Velocity of Change*, because your work deals with light and color, which of course moves at the speed of light. The velocity of change is slow, even if it is speeding up. Could you explain the title?

Odita: There are no lines in nature, only forms. When we look at and contemplate a space, we are looking at the edges of objects that are not lines but shadow and light. The shift of shadow that

defines form is based on the velocity of the light, or the velocity of change of light. I was thinking, “Wow, no lines. What are lines? They are separations, or containers. It’s something in a simplistic way that makes a form on a piece of paper.” If things have no lines in space then the lines we see in forms are the lines that we draw to separate us as human beings, to be structured. I like to think of things deeply, because it’s fun.

AL: It’s the pushing back of those lines.

Odita: Exactly.