

## Jeremiah Onifadé's paintings reflect the Black experience — and our shared humanity

The Nigerian-born, Dallas-based artist's exhibition is at SITE131 through March 27.

By Lauren Smart  
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This just might be Jeremiah Onifadé's year.



Jeremiah Onifadé, 'Recushioning With Panadol Extra,' 2020, Acrylic and Garri on canvas (Jeremiah Onifadé)

The Nigerian-born, Dallas-based artist receives a major introduction to the Dallas art scene with his first solo gallery exhibition. His colorful, surrealist acrylic paintings are getting a premier placement at **Site 131 gallery**: the first time in its five-year history the space would be dedicated to just one artist.

The exhibition, "Surreal Figures," on view through March 27, is a collection of 13 works on canvas. The paintings, which vary in size and subject, fill the gallery walls with a multitude of abstract narratives, at once familiar and unsettling.



In works like "Red Settee," Jeremiah Onifadé borrows themes and ideas from his childhood in Nigeria, his adulthood in the United States and his dreams, which he says come to him in vivid colors. (Jeremiah Onifadé)

Onifadé borrows themes and ideas from his childhood in Nigeria, his adulthood in the United States — where he moved at age 22 — and his dreams, which he says come to him in vivid colors. He creates characters that recur and refract in the different works, always cycloptic, the unblinking eye of the figure gazing at the viewer — not glaring, but not quite welcoming.

Onifadé, 33, dabbled at Savannah College of Art and Design before dropping out, but he is ultimately a self-taught artist, religiously studying artists like Caravaggio and Velázquez to understand how they used light and color to develop a style that earned them a spot in both the historic canon and in the mind's eye of an everyday viewer.

Across the room are two other youthful figures holding candies, but these figures wear colorful striped shirts, and the whites of their eyes are blood red. The more masculine

of the figures carries the title *Portrait of a Young Boy with a Faltered Smile*. As with many of his paintings, the bright and playful colors are lined with a sinister edge. In this series of works, nearly every painting has a snake-like figure flailing in the background, growing larger, as the figures seem to exit childhood into more frenetic, convoluted scenes. For Onifadé, these slithering figures represent human emotions.

Site 131 co-founder and president Joan Davidow discovered Onifadé's work last summer after he hosted **a three-person exhibition in a small South Dallas house for 96 hours straight**. That series of work contained some of the building blocks for this new exhibition, from the symbolism to the way he incorporates garri, or eba, a grain common in the Nigerian diet, as a way to imply motion.

That exhibition was up just weeks into the daily Black Lives Matter protests, which gave renewed meaning to the way he paints Black bodies in complicated spaces. His work's political quality, often more Nigerian than American, took on a new layer of significance. It spoke to his existence as a Black man in America.



Artist Jeremiah Onifadé has his first solo gallery exhibition, at Site 131 gallery in Dallas. (Nan Coulter / Special Contributor)

In the opening-night talk, Onifadé said he hoped his work would serve as a rapid, abstract history of Black people, rooted in his own particular experience.

In response, Davidow made an observation: The nuanced way he uses color, the gallerist said, didn't necessarily cause her to register them as Black people, or least not simply Black people.

I thought of one painting, in particular, during this moment. It's a small, colorful work on the back wall of the exhibition, *A Night of Good News*. In this homage to Henri Matisse's *Dance*, Onifadé paints figures in soft hues of pink, yellow, green and black holding hands, swinging one another through the air. It's clearly a moment of joy; a moment of unity.

Onifadé took a moment to answer, "In some ways, I'm playing with color, with pigments, as a way to say, 'We are one.'"

In pursuit of his own artistic voice, Onifadé borrows from history and from the masters, but he constructs his work with the hope of mythologizing the Black experience.

He paints the specific as a way to angle toward the general. In his work *A Visit to State Camp*, the figure holds popular Nigerian menthol candies called Tom Toms. It's at once the story of a kid trading candy as a way to make friends and, for Onifadé, a story about post-colonial Africa, in which the social dynamics were complicated by the introduction of foreign goods.

"This painting becomes about the question: 'Why do people associate with certain other people?'" Onifadé says. "It's questioning materialism vs. internal value."

Jeremiah Onifadé's "Surreal Figures" is on view through March 27 at Site 131, 131 Payne St., Dallas. Tuesday through Friday by appointment, Fridays from noon to 5 p.m. Free. For more information, call 214-871-2971 or email [hello@site131.com](mailto:hello@site131.com).



Jeremiah Onifadé's "A Night Of Good News No. 1," a 2019 acrylic-on-canvas work, portrays a moment of joy and unity. (Jeremiah Onifadé)