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## Painter Jeremiah Onifadé Wants to Make the World Better For His Son

In a solo exhibition in the Design District gallery SITE131, the Nigeria-born artist tells stories through distinctive, orb-like figures.

BY TYLER HICKS  
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Jeremiah Onifadé's "Midday Sun," which is hanging at SITE 131 in the Design District

If Jeremiah Onifadé's son is killed by a police officer, he knows what will be said. "They'll say they feared for their lives," Onifadé says. "They'll say he was on drugs. They'll say he was a 'thug.'"

It doesn't matter that the 33-year-old painter's son is only two years old. This is what is on Onifadé's mind at 3 a.m., when the world is asleep and he's putting paint to canvas in his garage.



*Portrait of a Young Boy with a Faltered Smile*

Onifadé's latest collection of paintings is on display through March 27 at the Design District gallery SITE 131. The exhibition, entitled "Surreal Figures," is a first for both parties. It's the first time a gallery has commissioned an exhibition from the painter, and it's the first time SITE 131 has devoted its entire space to a single artist.

Through the distinctive, orb-like figures depicted in each of the exhibit's 13 paintings, Onifadé presents a window to the Black experience: the joy, the heartbreak, the truth. His hope, as an artist and a father, is that his son won't have to live in a world where his humanity is an afterthought. But if the world's libraries and textbooks aren't full of authentic stories, how can that world exist?

"You don't need to meet a White person to know how they fall in love, because we have Cupid," he says. "But there is no imagery that the world looks at and says, 'Oh, that's how a Black person feels.'"

Today, talking on the phone about his work, Onifadé says he feels happy. In fact, the painter exudes happiness and contentment

pretty much every day of the week — no small feat for a guy averaging four hours of sleep. During the other 20 hours, you can either find Onifadé at his desk, playing with his kids, or painting in his garage.

Over the last six years, the artist has created a work-life schedule that allows him to spend time with his family while still devoting long hours to his craft. He holds down a nine-to-five gig as an engineer at Verizon, so most days he doesn't start painting until 6 p.m. or 7 p.m. If he goes more than one day without mixing colors or splashing them on a canvas, Onifadé will start to fidget and shake.

"I had to make my life revolve around my passion," he says. "It was incredibly difficult at first, but when you're an artist, you get used to balancing all these different things and working 14 hours a day."

The painter's humility belies his lofty ambition.

"I have two goals: first, to have my work used as part of a textbook to teach kids, and secondly, to have them used in museums and foundations, where it becomes part of the future," he says. "That's why I do this: to be part of history and existence."

Onifadé fled his hometown of Kaduna, Nigeria after the introduction of Sharia law created widespread violence in 2000. Christians clashed with Muslims, and thousands of Nigerians were

killed. The painter, then 13, saw a man butchered to death with a machete just outside his front door.

Yet the Nigeria Onifadé captures on canvas is not violent; it's often calm and quiet. People dance and play checkers. They worry whether their degrees will give them the careers they want, and they go about their lives with quiet dignity. Of course, the painter doesn't expect every patron to "get" the intricacies of each piece, but if the work resonates with someone in some way, Onifadé feels like he did his job.

"I see people get sucked in, and before they even realize it's about Black people, they love it," he says. "They're invested in the story they see on the canvas. That's the beauty of it, that's how flexible the stories are. It matches a lot of their life, and a lot of people don't know I'm talking about Nigeria."

Four of the 13 paintings in "Surreal Figures" are new creations, including a 60-by-48 inch canvas depicting a game of checkers. Patrons are invited to sit on a chair in front of the canvas and "play" against the orb-like figure staring down on them. Those orbs are a visual language of the painter's making, an immediately identifiable character that serves as a signifier of Black bodies. He wants you to be able to look at a painting and say, "Oh yeah, Jeremiah made that." More importantly, he wants to use these recurring characters as a way to tell human stories.

"I didn't want to paint a replica of the human figure, so I thought, 'What else is out there? What hasn't been done?'"

While poring over old art textbooks (a typical practice for him), Onifadé found a novel way to depict his humans. To give himself plenty of color options, he decided to retain at least one eye. "The eyes have a color that can tell you so much," he says. "That's a story on its own."

As he combed through those textbooks, the painter stumbled upon something disconcerting. While some Black artists from the 1920s and 1930s have been canonized, most of the esteemed icons of art have been White. When Black art is kept out of the textbooks, he argues, we lose a valuable medium for understanding Black culture.

"The emotions of a Black person are not really known by several races," Onifadé says. "Through slavery and colonization, we've had to learn and adapt to other race's emotions. Society is



The artist Jeremiah Onifadé.  
Emily Berger

moving at this very fast pace where new cultures are coming in, and if we're not reminded of the old cultures, we'll lose them."

The painter can talk at length about these big ideas: history, culture, whose stories get told, whose don't. And the more you talk to him, the more you realize how deeply invested he is in being a part of history. Not for his own gain; for his son, for his newborn, and for their children, too.

"If we have more Black people talking about this, it's like having a library," he says. "Eighty, 90 years from now, I can be your reminder. You can see my painting and see who we were. We danced. We loved. We were here."

*"Surreal Figures" is on display at SITE131 through March 27. Onifadé will be discussing the paintings and his work in a special chat at the gallery at 3 p.m. on Saturday, February 20, 2021.*