

PATRON

ART / CULTURE / DESIGN

January 21, 2021 Patron
Terri Provencal

Patron (P): Congratulations on your solo show at Site131. You've said that emotion and memories are the driving force behind your work. From being thirteen years old during the Kaduna Riots of 2000 to immigrating to the US, you've experienced such emotional, physical, and mental turmoil, however, your work seems remarkably calm on the surface. Is that calmness, something you strive for, or is that an accurate interpretation of your work?



Midday Sun, Anikulapo, Acrylic and Garri on canvas 60in x 48in 2020

Jeremiah Onifadé (JO): The calmness comes from both striving for it and at the same time an allegorical interpretation of my work. For someone like me who has seen a lot and been dragged through a lot emotionally, calmness is a sweeter side of life that I get to enjoy knowing fully well how terrible the opposite can be.

I believe the way I paint mimics a representation of real life—our lives. Instances where we all look colorful, calm, and bright on the outside, but after getting to know us you realize how many bags we are carrying. For me, it is most pronounced with black and brown people on how we look like humans on the surface but are treated like sub-humans silently. That for me championed the colorful-to-malevolent way of working. I realized the events in several lives, communities, societies are the same, however what differentiated them is time and republic. I took the events in my personal life and merged them with a subject matter that is relatable by any beholder to speak about the future.

P: You've created an entire otherworld through your ORBS and CODS, yet they are rooted in autobiographical narratives of your life growing up in Nigeria. How did these figures, ORBS, develop?



Red Settee, Acrylic and Garri on canvas 48in x 36in 2020

Jeremiah Onifadé (JO): My introduction to “Western art” was sort of a journey into deep art history where I was searching for the inception of art. After stumbling on prehistoric, renaissance, rococo, mannerism, baroque etc. periods—with lots of interest in Titian, Velasquez, and Caravaggio and getting a feel of why they were who they were, I realized that what each artist did in those times was work within a practice that drove them into creating a personal vocabulary they could use to speak visually while they worked at the courts or in their studio. With that, they were able to tackle several philosophical, psychological, sociological, and historical alps. Knowing that I wanted to interrogate several subject matters that required personal exploration of black and brown bodies, I decided to create figures that could do these within any given contexts. I took what I had learned from years of painting portraiture for people and merged it with what I had learned while just letting my persona take over.

P: Please tell us about the unblinking eye that replaces a traditional portrait?

JO: For over a period of three years I slowly composed attributes I wanted the ORBS to either possess or not have... I wanted it as a representation of the human figure but a little childish with simpler forms while incorporating a more layered, technical, form that has depth and textures within it. Given all that, the human head sounded too serious for such a figure, so I decided to choose one random anatomical part of the head as a representational substitute of the head itself. I tried out the eye, and it felt really playful and easy to mess with, so it stuck with me ever since.

P: Your CODS, though subtle, convey human emotion. Will you please describe this distinct vocabulary and how it developed?

JO: The CODS came about after a period of observing people and interrogating them about their emotions. I told them to qualify it in a tangible way. Several people would say I feel, then pause and gesture their feelings with their hands. The gestures looked like a moving fish, snake, or rope and for others they used colors to describe their emotion for the day. I loved how Francis Bacon communicated his emotions visually, but I knew I wanted something more “me”

and personal, so I drew a representation of what I had soaked in, and from there it grew....

P: Your signature vernacular is inspired by Homer's Odyssey which is ultimately about returning home after the fall of Troy. Will you tell us how this enduring classic influenced your work?

JO: When I was in secondary school in Nigeria, I was not happy with how much we had moved around and the reason behind it which was the riot, so I found it hard to focus on school/life. We had a class called Literature in English which came right after we had geography (where I learned about different countries and cultures.) Literature in English was my safe haven, I gave my entire devotion to Macbeth, Odyssey, Greek Mythology, Rome, Pre-Colonial and Ancient Africa, etc. After learning all about Ulysses' trials and tribulations, I felt like whatever I was going through and about to go through were atomic when compared to his. Because he thought carefully and applied philosophical values to his reasoning especially when he felt entrapped, I began to apply them to the works I was making which interrogated problems facing black and brown bodies.



Barnawa Is Now On Fire, NTA News, Acrylic and Garri on canvas 36in x 48in

P: In many of your paintings the work is anchored by a door such as Levintis, Yellow Seas, and Speaking of Which. Where are these doors taking the viewer?

JO: The use of doors is as consistent as my use of ORBS and CODS. I wanted viewers to always remember that everything both physical and psychological has an entry and an exit. Taking necessary steps to figure out which door needs to be unlocked so as to access specific vectors or closed against certain trauma or fears, begins the journey to controlling one's emotion.

P: We love your titles. Our favorite: Portrait of a Young Boy with a Faltered Smile. Do you have a title in mind when you begin to paint? And will you describe what spurred the Faltered Smile?

JO: Thank you. No, sometimes I don't have the titles for weeks after finishing the works. Mostly a title comes last, the story always comes at the beginning then with a lot of vivid scenes from my dreams. The title Portrait of a Young Boy with a Faltered Smile came to be a while after completing the work which describes me as a younger boy who presents himself as a teenager ready to work for people so as to help the family. However, the individual who wanted to hire me



Recushioning With Panadol Extra, Acrylic and Garri on canvas
36in x 48in 2020

realized that it would be nice to exploit the opportunity since my parents weren't aware I was working. At first, I was happy to be working until I realized he wouldn't pay me until I did five times the pay's worth. I stared at the work for a while in my studio then remembered how that broke my smile.

P: While all the work is alive with color and appears cheerful at first glance, there are deep narratives that are often malevolent in nature. *Barnawa is Now on Fire*, NTA News in particular is rooted in violence and the Molotov cocktail displays this. Please tell us about

how you have worked through trying events in your life, like sheltering during a riot, and translated them into visual stories.

JO: I believe the way I paint mimics a representation of real life, our lives. Instances where we all look colorful and bright on the outside, but after getting to know us you realize how much baggage we are carrying. For me, it is most pronounced with black and brown people on how we look like humans on the surface but are treated like sub-humans silently. That for me championed the colorful-to-malevolent way of working. I realized the events in several lives, communities, societies are the same, however what differentiates them is time and republic. I took the events in my personal life and merged them with a subject matter that is relatable by any beholder to speak about the future.

P: Do you believe violence in society happens quickly, or does it creep and build?

JO: I believe societal violence creeps and builds up slowly over time, especially where you have the laws favoring one part of the society and the other part constantly pointing at it as an issue. But it is easily solvable, all we have to do is take a seat and listen to each other's plight. Life is a singular entity that deals different games to each person so it's already unpredictable as is.

P: Suffering in America may seem less urgent compared with other nations, however, 2020 highlighted what many Americans already knew; so many of us are suffering. From your perspective, how does the narrative of suffering shape the population of a country, and the worldview of that nation?

JO: I think everyone needs to know that the ability to fix things are in our hands and allowing a part of the society to suffer, when it can be worked on, does not lead to a "one-day-everyone-will-suddenly-forget" situation. It grows and leaves carcasses from generation to generation, so it doesn't shape the population in a favorable way.

We are a nation leading in several advanced fields of discovery, so when countries that look up to us realize that we still have internal battles and division, they are forced to question our claims and undermine our decisions.

P: Does suffering need to be seen and heard to be addressed?

JO: History holds true to several sufferings that are still repeated today, waiting to see more people suffer before addressing it is not fair, and will only destroy more people. It definitely needs to be heard for those who do not really understand the plight of those suffering. Taking time to learn about those suffering is a good substitution to seeing and hearing. Suffering cannot be neglected and as much as going to Mars is still a critical field of research, people need to dedicate their time and studies to addressing the suffering of the populates that have sounded the bell of its existence.

P: It's Friday Afternoon, Ikole Ekiti is a poignant remembrance of a grandmother rocking a grandchild. Here the CODS are large and harmonious. Will you tell us about the painting?

JO: Harmonious, I like that interpretation. Ikole is a city in Ekiti state in Nigeria, where my parents drove us through its neighborhoods on the way to our grandparent's house. I'd often



It's Friday Afternoon, Ikole Ekiti, Acrylic and Garri on canvas 16in x 20in, 2019.

notice grand-moms sitting by the balcony/verandah with their grandchild rocking them for hours. I was confused as to why they weren't working or doing something more important (my own gullible thoughts). My inquisitive self also asked my mother for a better answer. She told me they were older and didn't have much time left, so she'd rather spend their time doing things that mattered to her. Later in life, while privately studying art history, I stumbled on a work by Poussin titled Dance To The Music of Time (1634) . It was commissioned by Rospigliosi, a future pope. An allegorical work, the dancers represented passing of time, the cycles of life while the elderly bearded man seated beside an hourglass represented time. In my work I wanted to represent the passing of time and how we spent it on things that matter.

P: Tell us about your time at SCAD. What was the single most important lesson you learned at SCAD?

JO: SCAD for me was much more than just school, it was a period in my life when things were uncertain and at the same time exposing; I had encounters that taught me life lessons. I couldn't afford the tuition, so I had to cut my art studies short. It felt like I was losing my only opportunity to achieve my goal. But some beautiful things came out of it—I saw the first few works that unleashed my understanding of art, I saw a show titled Mercy, Patience and Destiny: The Women of Whitfield Lovell's Tableaux which was exhibited when Laurie Ann Farrell was still the Executive Director of Exhibitions. But the most important lesson I learned was a statement made by my Professor Beth Baronian, she said: "Always let your imagination work for you in all you do".

P: Love that! You've indicated the ORBS and CODS will persist in your work. What's next?

JO: For now, I'm working on two new paintings. They are still in their early stages filled with stories and allegories but (I'm) not yet sure which next exhibitions they will go to. However, I am always working towards my next shows and exhibitions.

P: We look forward to seeing the new work. Any advice to young artists?

JO: Don't forget to bring your childhood ideas to life.