



Toyin Ojih Odutola

**THE
FIRMAMENT**

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART
DARTMOUTH

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John R. Stomberg, Virginia Rice Kelsey 1961s Director

In her recent work, Toyin Ojih Odutola has created a possible Nigeria, one whose inhabitants thrive, having long ago arrived at a naturalized state of wealth and comfort unfettered by the enduring legacy of colonization. “Why not?” she asks. Why not imagine an alternative and natural historical progression of Nigerian royalty? Her cast, the stars in her firmament, enjoy old wealth. They are comfortable in trappings of their own design. They have neither need nor desire to prove anything. Their station is assured, assumed, and unquestioned.

Ojih Odutola uses bright color and bold pattern, often in large scale, to depict her subjects. She establishes a compassionate confrontation with the viewer. Through the use of scale she reinforces her subjects’ presence, and through her remarkable mark-making technique she draws us close to her surfaces. Many of the drawings are life sized, some full length. This adds an uncanny sense that we share a space with her subjects, and furthers the imaginative leap her viewers take into her world.

Stories take center stage in these recent drawings. She catches her characters at quiet moments captured from otherwise rich and complex lives. Short on specifics and long on allusion, the narratives she evokes suggest a wide emotional range. We are not meant to know exactly what takes place in these lives, but we are invited into their private spaces and we share an implied intimacy with many of them. Ojih Odutola allows us to peek, but not pry, into their lives.

While the backgrounds of these drawings, and the technique she uses to execute them, herald a departure for Ojih Odutola, she has long drawn

skin with hatch marks in assorted dark hues. It is, after all, flesh that carries conceptual weight in Ojih Odutola’s work. It is dark, rich, and multihued, and her renderings are detailed. Her practice has been to push herself in the way she depicts bodies, interrogating how race is understood in relation to drawing. Many of her earlier works explored the indicators of racial identity, revealing the artificiality of these constructs. In *Writ Large*, 2016 (fig. 1), for example, the skin is drawn in a variety of tones reflective of the rich variation of hues in flesh. The result is a deep and nuanced depiction of skin tone that resists oversimplification as “black.”

For this, and much of her work, Ojih Odutola models three-dimensional forms through closely drawn parallel lines—hatch marks—used to create facets. She also creates small patches of contrasting colors that work to enliven the bodies, suggesting highlights and musculature. This technique is notably reserved for the depiction of skin; she draws clothes, furniture, and even the landscape in a looser, more broadly marked technique.

Ojih Odutola also uses language to expand on the potential interpretations of her work. Pithy and evocative, her titles are brilliantly conceived to direct the viewer without being reductive. When something is “writ large,” for example, it is meant to be obvious to the point of requiring no further thought. Yet her subject’s identity can only be writ large if we accept a priori the very set of assumptions that the artist wants us—everyone—to reexamine. Race, Ojih Odutola reminds us, is constructed—neither pre-existing nor self-evident—a fact she foregrounds through both the manner of her depiction of flesh and the implied narratives she evokes.



Figure 1 (top, with detail). Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Writ Large*, 2016, pen ink, gel ink, marker, and graphite on paper, 17 × 14 inches. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth: Purchased through the Contemporary Art Fund; 2016.16.

For the works in *Firmament*, Ojih Odutola explores the worlds of two old-line families, the UmuEze Amara and the Obafemi, who have become one through the marriage of their sons. The portraits on display are understood as part of the family collection, shared now for the sake of this exhibition. Through the individuals she portrays, and the settings they inhabit, we gain access to a private realm. *Newlyweds on Holiday*, 2016 (plate 12), anchors the story: this couple's union has brought the two families together. The two young men appear to stop just long enough for a quick portrait. They reveal their relationship in a manner as unaffected as their pose—they casually touch hands and their feet abut. Their clothes set a tone of nonchalant elegance that is reinforced by the opulence of their setting (based on the visible décor, the room's dimensions must be immense). Despite being bold, colorful, and dynamic, their fashionable attire seems unaffected.

In *Surveying the Family Seat*, 2017 (plate 6), the artist extends the overarching tone of aristocratic nonchalance in her subjects. Here she modifies the established art-historical trope for a landowner: a man stands in the foreground with an extended landscape visible in the background. The setting amplifies her title and works to define the subject's identity—he is the master of the visible domain, and his is the “magisterial gaze.”¹ The man looks out on a vast landscape attesting its fertility by the careful rows of verdant growth. While he dresses more comfortably than the canonical Euro-American forebears typical of this portrait style, he does not wear a worker's clothes. This man appears as a gentleman farmer. Attending to management, and not labor, he appears long accustomed to his station in life.

While creating a history for the vibrant people she draws, Ojih Odutola simultaneously “writes” a revised art history. Her use of hatching to create planes that describe volume echoes an approach that began at the dawn of modernism. It is a conceptual as well as visual shift. Hatches and cross-hatches had long been used to create the illusion of volume in space on a two-dimensional plane (the canvas or paper). In the decades leading up to 1900, more artists began to use hatches to emphasize three-dimensional objects as flat arrangements of shapes on a plane. This was an important shift in how artists reflected the world they saw—a move away from attempting to recreate “naturally” what

was seen to looking to nature for arresting arrangements of shapes and colors (and soon to abstractions that focused just on the composition without regard to the visible world). Though Ojih Odutola's marks are highly individualized, we can trace the technique to earlier artists who used hatching as both a tool for depiction and as a self-referential signifier that focuses attention on the nature of depiction in art.

While in a longer consideration of the topic we would want to follow this thread back at least to the work of Paul Cézanne, a more apt and applicable connection for Ojih Odutola's vocabulary of hatching emerged in the mid-twentieth century. In the case of Jasper Johns, for example, the hatching marks themselves became the subject of many of his drawings and paintings. For Johns the mark was the message. It was art about art. Johns used it as a way to downplay the autobiographical in art. It also indicated a more general art-historical shift toward creating distance between artists and their work. Johns, and an increasing number of artists working during the second half of the last century, embraced "the way art is made" as their subject, rather than focus on the individual, personality, or ideas about an "authentic self."

Hatching can also carry a symbolic weight. Used for centuries in a tradition increasingly criticized for the stories it did not tell, the humble hatch is ubiquitous in European and Euro-American art that was complicit in presenting a one-sided view of history. Today, Ojih Odutola uses hatches, a reliable formal tool for drawing, as a way of imbuing skin with a complexity of hues. But in her hands they are also multivalent signifiers freighted with memories of art traditions that ignored or distorted people from the African diaspora. Her use of hatch marks thus simultaneously offers an effective representational technique and a platform for interrogating a deeply flawed past.

In its embrace of "black" as a topic, a color, a separator, and a construct, Ojih Odutola's work aligns with contemporary artists more than with modernists of prior generations. Particularly for the creation of bold characters that populate worlds of the artist's invention, we can look profitably at the work of fellow painters such as Kerry James Marshall and Lynette Yiadom-Bokye. These artists have similarly

imagined rich universes inhabited by complex characters that decimate artificial boundaries of race and gender. Ojih Odutola herself has suggested Marshall and Yiadom-Bokye as artistic exemplars.

With this latest series, though, Ojih Odutola has crafted an entire alternative history that is more complex and consistent in its narrative implications than the worlds of these other contemporary painters. She has imagined a totally different past for the people who live in her current work. What if Nigeria had been allowed to progress on its own, without the catastrophe of colonization? With this supposition in the background, she picks up the story today. Her characters affect the insouciance that comes from inherited wealth and a life largely devoid of worry. They live with styles and designs that have evolved naturally from generations of Nigerian elites constantly refining from within their own traditions. They occupy a country of their own devising that clearly benefits from peace and prosperity.

Ojih Odutola's project has theoretical connections to contemporary conceptual artists who have also invented, reinvented, or simply altered history as a means to highlight social tragedies from the past. They, too, focus on historical epochs whose impacts continue to be tangible in everyday life. Frohawk Two Feathers (Umar Rashid), for example, has an ongoing project that starts with a premise that England and France joined to become Frengland in the eighteenth century.² With this vehicle, Two Feathers is able to elaborate the flexibility of identity. In a different manner, but also in line with this approach, Walid Raad spent fifteen years sharing the imagined exploits of the fictional Atlas Group, which purported to reveal the work of a careful historian who documented the political intrigues of Raad's native Lebanon.³ Through an ongoing, complicated, and incomplete tale of spies and intrigue, Raad was able to hint at socio-political topics from terrorism to racial profiling.

In many ways, though, Ojih Odutola's visions connect her work more closely to a wide range of writers, from novelists to comic book authors. Hers is an approach that uses fiction as a vehicle to address the malleability of history and power, as well as identity and politics. In her work, the past, history itself, becomes a medium to be formed—or reformed. While more implied than delineated, the backstory

she creates rewrites the story of an Africa brutally enslaved. Ojih Odutola uses the present to measure the past and to demonstrate the depth of the tragedy that was—and is—in play. Underlying her work we find a theme both direct and provocative: it did not need to be this way.

There are authors whose work evokes similar sentiments, but not in the same manner. Ojih-Odutola was recently compared to the Ghanaian American novelist Yaa Gyasi.⁴ Not only do the two share a surprisingly similar biography, but Gyasi's book *Homegoing* is composed of episodes that each focus on an individual—the literary parallel to an imagined portrait. The crucial difference lies in Gyasi's adherence to historical realities, whereas Ojih-Odutola has reimaged at least the last five hundred years. While both are fictive, Gyasi personalizes the past while Ojih-Odutola reconstructs it.

Octavia Butler, on the other hand, used science fiction to address similar themes. She imagined decidedly dystopian futures (and presents) that were never that far off—temporally or in plausibility—from the present. In *Kindred*, her breakout 1979 novel, Butler's protagonist, Dana, is physically thrown back into the bleak past through time travel. We see the physical violence and emotional trauma of life in the antebellum south without the gauzy modifier of history. By taking her lead character directly out of contemporary (1976) California, Butler makes the life endured by Dana's ancestors vivid, palpable, and horrifying. Butler used science fiction to bend reality in ways that historical writing could not. Her books arrive at a form of truth unattainable through other forms, but like Gyasi they chart the never-ending forces unleashed by enslaving Africans and colonizing their homelands.

Ojih Odutola's work takes a different tack. Hers is a present unimaginable in Butler's novels. Ojih Odutola dares to present a fantastical contemporary vision while avoiding the trappings of utopianism. Her family has not been spared of the weight of human life, just the oppression of ignorance. Her Nigeria engages with the world as witnessed in the drawing *Representatives of State*, 2016–17 (plate 13). Like the leaders in mythical Wakanda, the nation represented in Ryan Coogler's 2018 film adaption of *The Black Panther*, Ojih Odutola's characters acknowledge their responsibility to be

good world citizens. Like the family imagined by Ojih Odutola, the Wakandans of Marvel Comics have not suffered colonization (it's a long story) and have achieved a much higher level of social cultivation, and civility, than their would-be oppressors.

It may be irresistible for future scholars to make the connection between Ojih Odutola's art and the historical moment in which it emerged. They will refer to the vast attendance at cinemas debuting *The Black Panther* in the winter of 2018; the resurrection of non-interventionism in American politics in 2017; and the context of political divisiveness and racial tensions that followed the election of 2016. This is the cauldron—social, political, and cultural—into which Ojih Odutola has added her voice. She has posed questions with her drawings. She asks her viewers to consider how conceptions of race are established and promulgated. She demonstrates how those very conceptions can and do shape experience. Her work is elaborate, provocative, poetic, and charged—revealing the details of these people's lives while only alluding to their lived experience. Ultimately, Ojih Odutola's *Firmament* reminds us both of “what could have been” and “what should be”—a world where difference, individualism, compassion, and civility are the norm and not distant ideals.

NOTES

1. Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, c. 1830–1865* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

2. See Bartholomew F. Bland, *Frohawk Two Feathers: Kill Your Best Ideas—The Battle for New York and Its Lifeline, the Hudson River* (New York: Hudson River Museum, 2015).

3. See Cassandra Nakas, Britta Schmitz, and Walid Raad, *Walid Raad: The Atlas Group, 1989–2004* (Cologne: Walther Konig, 2007).

4. Taiye Selasi, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young African Immigrant,” *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, May 8, 2017.

PLATES



Plate 1. *The Bride*, 2016, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 24 × 19 inches.



Plate 2. *Between the Margins*, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 24 × 19 inches.



Plate 3. *Winter Dispatch*, 2016, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 29¼ x 39½ inches.



Plate 4. *Excavations*, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 24 x 19 inches. Courtesy of Ellen and Steve Susman.



Plate 5. *Industry (Husband and Wife)*, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper (diptych), 24 x 19 inches, each sheet. Private collection.



Plate 6.
Surveying the Family Seat, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and
 pencil on paper, 97 × 60 inches.



Plate 7.
Pregnant, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper,
 74½ × 42 inches.



Plate 8.
First Night at Boarding School, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 71 × 42 inches.



Plate 9.
Years Later—Her Scarf, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 72 × 42 inches. Collection of Lauren Hudgins, Class of 2005.



Plate 10. *Unclaimed Estates*, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 77 × 42 inches.



Plate 11.
The Missionary, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper,
 63 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 42 inches. Private collection.



Plate 12.
Newlyweds on Holiday, 2016, pastel, charcoal, and pencil
 on paper, 63 x 41 inches.



Plate 13. *Representatives of State*, 2016–17, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 75½ × 50 inches.

At the Whitney, a Vision of Africa— Without the Colonialist Meddling

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Julia Felsenthal

The following was published in the October 27, 2017, issue of Vogue. Reprint courtesy Julia A. Felsenthal / Vogue. Text © Condé Nast.

In the summer of 2016, the poet Claudia Rankine published an essay in *Aperture* magazine about drawings made by the artist Toyin Ojih Odutola. Ojih Odutola was born in Nigeria, immigrated to the States with her family at age five, and spent her formative years in Huntsville, Alabama. “Individuals populate her portraits,” wrote Rankine, “but remain in conversation with something less knowable than their presumed identity. To settle down her images, to name them, is to render them monolithic.”

Rankine was writing about Ojih Odutola’s pen ink drawings, for some time the signature of her practice. These were, in her own telling, “conceptual portraits” of anonymous subjects (though if you looked closely, the faces often resembled that of the artist) depicted unclothed and decontextualized in blank space [see fig. 1, p. 37]. What distinguished them was both medium—pen and paper is not often associated with fine art—and style. Ojih Odutola’s subject, principally, was black skin, which she drew shimmering and undulating and *alive*, sometimes in monotones, sometimes with prismatic bursts of color. She wanted to show “what skin feels like,” she told Taiye Selasi in the *New York Times*. “The epidermis packs so much. Why would you limit it to the flattest blackness possible?” These were technical, material investigations into modes of rendering blackness, something the Western art historical canon long treated as a matter of limited interest (in that sense, she’s as much in conversation with an abstractionist like Ad Reinhardt, who spent a

decade singularly devoted to black paint, as she is with a contemporary figurative painter like Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, whose fictional subjects also subvert notions of “presumed identity”). On another level, Ojih Odutola’s drawings operated as a sort of clever reversal: *If all you see is skin, let me show you how I see it, as supernatural, transcendent, defiantly hyperrealistic.*

Ojih Odutola’s pen drawings won her a significant following. Solange Knowles is a collector. Lee Daniels chose to hang one of the artist’s works—a 2013 drawing called *Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer*—on the walls of Cookie’s apartment on the third season of *Empire*. In 2015, for an exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, Ojih Odutola introduced a new series, called *The Treatment*, in which she sourced images of famous white men—Prince Charles, Benedict Cumberbatch, Bobby Fischer, to name a few—and drew them with black skin, rendering her subject, in some cases, unrecognizable (“the blackness usurps,” the artist observed to *Interview* magazine).

The Whitney Museum of American Art bought one of those *Treatment* drawings, and a couple years later, the institution has also given Ojih Odutola, 32, her first New York City solo museum show. The work that comprises *To Wander Determined*, which opened last week and is curated by Rujeko Hockley and Melinda Lang, represents a major departure from the work that sparked Rankine’s observation. These are dazzlingly colorful, large-scale (nearly life-size) portraits of richly dressed black individuals. Self-possessed, blasé even, they pose in lush interior and exterior settings, rendered in a sumptuous palette of ocher yellow, deep blue green, lavender,

and millennial pink. In *Pregnant* (2017 [see plate 7]), a slender woman in a floral silk top and a deliberately see-through skirt stands against a glass block wall—a meditation on transparency, perhaps—near a doorway leading out to a sandy path. In *Surveying the Family Seat* (2017 [see plate 6]), a bald, bearded patriarch in a *Deadwood*-esque vest and trousers gazes out, absentmindedly, over green hills and pastures. *Representatives of State* (2016–17 [see plate 13]), which hangs at the entrance of the gallery, shows four female figures, standing in front of an arched window, gazing down at the viewer, regal and distant. Wall text offers clues into who these people are: The members of two of Nigeria's oldest noble clans, joined together by the marriage of two of their sons, the Marquess of UmuEze Amara, TMH Jidefor Emeka, and Lord Temitope Omodele from the House of Obafemi. It's this couple who have together lent their venerable collection of family portraits to the Whitney, and it is they who seem to be depicted, clad in skinny slouchy suits, their hands casually brushing, in *Newlyweds on Holiday* (2016 [see plate 12]). The plaque that presents this context is signed by the Marquess's deputy secretary, one Toyin Ojih Odutola.

These colorful, intricate, monumental images may be a new direction for the artist, but like her earlier work, there's something deliberately unsettling here. How can Toyin Ojih Odutola be both a secretary and a Whitney-anointed art phenom? Isn't homosexuality criminalized in Nigeria? Identity, it's clear, is ever shifting. So is material: From afar, these appear to be oil paintings; on closer examination, it's evident that they're drawings on paper, made using chalk pastel, charcoal, and graphite, a technique that the artist developed during a 2016 residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Northern California, and explored further for a solo show last year at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora (there are a few drawings from that exhibition, which focused largely on the UmuEze side of the family, that also appear in this one, which focuses mostly on the Obafemi side).

Within these portraits, anachronisms and anachronisms abound. Some clothing is overtly contemporary, some is retro or difficult to place in time. Or in space: in *Years Later—Her Scarf* (2017 [see plate 9]), a man dressed for cold weather sits in front of an open doorway, palm fronds waving outside. In

The Missionary (2017 [see plate 11]), a woman sits on a terrace overlooking a hillside studded with buildings, some of them terra-cotta-roofed farm houses, others concrete, Brutalist-looking bunkers. Is there a landscape in the world that contains both? If you study the indoor spaces, you'll find angles that don't make sense, M. C. Escher-style illusions, off-kilter vantage points. These moments are intentional, opportunities to set the viewer on edge, and they point to the most unnerving incongruity of all: In this country, we have no visual vernacular for imagining long-standing, aristocratic black wealth. And Ojih Odutola is asking us to stretch to picture it, and in so doing, to recognize that it should not feel like such a stretch. "Everyone says, 'I wish they were real,'" the artist explained when we spoke by phone about her fictional dynasty. "And the thing is, they could be. It's just there was never the opportunity to discover that. And so just imagine that. Really and truly imagine that we were left to our own devices, and we developed on our own: Without any of the colonialist meddling, what would have happened?"

In a way, it's the converse of the *Treatment* series: black figures imbued with white privilege. What's most unexpected about these figures, Ojih Odutola pointed out, is their utter sense of ease, of nonchalance, even insouciance, reflected in their gestures, their postures, their gazes, an entitlement that the artist knows viewers—at least, American viewers—will find hard to square with the color of their skin. "There are imaginary black figures on the wall of the Whitney, and they're completely and utterly self-contained, living their best lives, not caring about our approval at all," she observed. "I just love that."

We talked more about the sleight of hand feat of *To Wander Determined*, why Ojih Odutola became so focused on the aesthetics of wealth, and why she decided to center this narrative on a gay couple.

You clearly know who all these people are and how they fit together, but you leave a lot of it deliberately murky. What's the value of allowing us to draw our own conclusions?

When I started this whole series, I had an outline. I knew the characters, their stories, their backgrounds. I had this whole family tree. That didn't need to translate to the audience. I wanted to

frame it in a way that feels like a panel from a graphic novel: You're just walking into that story; it seems disorienting. It seems like I need more context to explain this picture. But the picture as it exists explains enough. I had to fight the knee-jerk reaction to add more. I like the idea that people can decode a picture, but not in some way where they need to figure out why this guy is wearing a vest that looks like it's from the 1920s, or why this woman is dressed like she's from the '40s. The point is more about why your imagination doesn't even assume this in the first place.

I kept thinking of what Claudia Rankine wrote about your work, that your images somehow refuse to be settled down, resist being tied to a single interpretation of identity.

Absolutely. I guess it suddenly becomes a trend now, that artists who look like me are being shown in institutions. And so the question I keep getting is, "What can you offer as a black woman artist?" Which is annoying for me, an immigrant kid who grew up here. I'm three-tiered in my identity: It's not just blackness, not just woman-ness; I'm also an immigrant. The thing I've always wanted to say is, "I want you to see how less small this world can be if we allow it." This is an imaginary family, but it's an imaginary family who could be anything to anyone. To demand that one thing be the case, that's not going to happen with this show. It feels good to leave this here and watch this work become in viewership. I'm just excited to see what it becomes in two months. What is the story? Once I put it on the walls, I'm kind of done.

The thing you're trying to get us to think about is what would black wealth look like and why is it so difficult for us to picture? The question of the aesthetics of wealth, more broadly, feels really timely: We've just seen someone rise to the presidency in this country whose wealth, or perceived wealth, seems to be his only credential. How much were you thinking about Trump when you were creating this work?

That was the start of this whole thing. It was 2016. We were mired in what would be the longest election cycle I'd ever experienced. The guy was a joke, he was a reality TV star, but everyone was like, "Look, he's wealthy, he's rich." That somehow justi-

fied that he had a lack of political experience, that he didn't have any idea what the job really entailed. It wasn't in this binary way; let me put black people in wealthy surroundings. I was like, "No, I want to see a space and a subject in that space that's unquestioned, because wealth is seen in a matter-of-fact way." What wealth affords us is the privilege to not care.

Why would we want someone who has the privilege to not care being our president? It makes no sense. It started from a slightly angry place. The show at MoAD [the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco] developed in a way that was hopefully very positive: Yes, wealth was the starting point, but also a wealth of self, the notion of knowing that you can walk into a space and see these people in the most boring staid way that wealth affords. Fast-forwarding to now, and the Trump administration era that we're in, where nothing seems for sure, everything is mercurial, every day is a new journey, you have to kind of block everything out. I started making this work in June, and I just shut everything off.

You mean, the news.

Yeah, it's exhausting. My concern as an artist is to reveal things in as subtle ways as I can. There's this nostalgia: "make America great again." White men are feeling stifled, like they can't speak freely. They're not accounted for. One of the things I tried to inject into this series was constantly hearing about the mediocrity of white men, how that was no longer helping them move through the world. Because, yes, it's a globalized, capitalistic system. You can't just be mediocre. You can't just fall back on your whiteness and your maleness as a thing that can get you ahead. You have to do a little more—you feel me, guys? Maybe put your tiki torches down and try something new. Because everyone here is hustling just to be seen, and all of us have to be exceptional to do so. You have been unremarkable for a very, very long time. I wanted to show an unremarkability: *Yeah, I'm in the middle of a gorgeous home, with a green chair, and a see-through skirt, and a paisley tee, and I'm just living my life.* There's no other purpose besides that. And that is a luxury that's been afforded a group of people for a very long time, until very recently. But in order for me to create that piece, I have to be extraordinary.

I have to work twice as hard to make this picture look unremarkable. That was what I was pushing at, what seeped in. Because I kept hearing it all summer, with all the statues, the protests, it was like, *Everyone is very angry*. And I don't understand where this anger is coming from. The people who should be angry are in Flint, Michigan.

There's another layer of politics: the couple at the center of these families is gay; in Nigeria, homosexuality is illegal.

These two men are my heart. I love the idea that these two grand families are anchored by two gay men; that's why we in the audience are even seeing this show: because of two gay men. And as a Nigerian, I'm very much aware that Nigeria made gay marriage illegal, which is very strange considering that they don't have dependable electricity in parts of the country, but yes, let's pass a gay marriage ban. That's definitely what we need right now in the world.

It's just two guys. That's all it should be. The same way you would see in the United Kingdom: This is the grand collection of the Althorp house, the earl of the Althorp and his wife, they're about to present their collection. That's the joke of it all, I just wanted two gay men to be the grand lords who are imparting their family history together. That, to me, shouldn't have to be political. I would just like people to walk through and not even think about it. That's when I know I've succeeded. They walk through and say, "Cool." They don't even realize at all.

Judging by your Instagram, you're a really voracious consumer of images. These drawings are all collaged from different bits of source material: the pose might be different from the face that might be different from the background, et cetera. Can you tell me a little bit about your process?

Hashtag research. The life is real. My work is investigative. It's rigorous. I'll look at thousands of images. Instagram is just a fraction, a tiny speck of that. A lot of it is stuff that's always been around that nobody knows about, particularly because you're dealing with the Western art-historical canon. You don't see an amazing commissioned

portrait of a Maharaji from the 1920s. I build off of composites: It is a collage, an amalgam of all this stuff. I put it all in the picture but have to make it in a way that you can't tell where the source is from. Everything feels familiar but still foreign and strange, remixed in a way that you haven't really seen this configuration before. This goes to using multiple figures for one figure. I've gone on *Vogue* many times, looked up The Row, Valentino, Duro Olowu, gotten ideas about pattern, color, composition. The best advice I ever got was from my mother: the more you see, the more you learn. I mean, it's true, right? When I was a kid, I came here and I couldn't speak English. I had to watch people. I had to watch a lot of TV. I remember, even as a kid, looking at Disney animation, watching movements, surroundings, because that was informing language for me.

You're so known for pen and ink. What was it like to switch to pastel?

The ballpoint pen was the rudimentary tool that was ubiquitous and easy to find in the doctor's office, and somehow I'm making drawings out of them; pastel is a very unusual choice, because it's a dry medium. It's chalk; it's not even oil pastel, which is a lot thicker, a lot more impasto potential with that. I wanted to have a tool I could blend, I could use my fingers. I'm not using a brush. I'm using my fingers and my hands to make these marks. Pastel is a very immediate tool, as is charcoal. Even though I'm using painterly methods, applying layering techniques that a painter would use, I'm still working with a material that is very quick. You gotta think on your feet with it. You have to really be confident with it. There were times I struggled. Let me tell you! Where I wanted to say, "Why in the hell would you work with this medium?" It is so difficult. It is so not about your life.

It's kind of a caustic medium. It's a bit of a diva. But I don't mind it. I feel like there's so much that people wouldn't expect. They'd expect oil painting, or acrylic, or watercolor, but they wouldn't expect a wall full of pastel drawings. It's so, like, Impressionist. What are you: Monet? It's also the kind of thing you would expect from a soccer mom. Here, I'm going to present it as grand historic narrative painting, and it's pastel drawing. That's pretty fucking amazing, that I could pull off that coup, you know?

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

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All works by Toyin Ojih Odutola, born 1984, in Nigeria.

The Bride, 2016, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 24 × 19 inches.

Between the Margins, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 24 × 19 inches.

Winter Dispatch, 2016, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 29¼ × 39½ inches.

Excavations, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 24 × 19 inches. Courtesy of Ellen and Steve Susman.

Industry (Husband and Wife), 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper (diptych), 24 × 19 inches, each sheet. Private collection.

Surveying the Family Seat, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 97 × 60 inches.

Pregnant, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 74½ × 42 inches.

First Night at Boarding School, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 71 × 42 inches.

Years Later—Her Scarf, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 72 × 42 inches. Collection of Lauren Hudgins, Class of 2005.

Unclaimed Estates, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 77 × 42 inches.

The Missionary, 2017, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 63¾ × 42 inches. Private collection.

Newlyweds on Holiday, 2016, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 63 × 41 inches.

Representatives of State, 2016–17, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 75½ × 50 inches.

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Toyin Ojih Odutola: **THE FIRMAMENT**

The exhibition *Toyin Ojih Odutola: The Firmament* is on view at Hood Downtown June 8–September 2, 2018. This exhibition was organized by the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, and generously supported by Kristy and Robert Harteveltdt '84 and Linda and Rick Roesch.

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Images are courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Cover: Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Pregnant*, 2017, pastel, charcoal and pencil on paper (detail).



About Hood Downtown

During the interval of our construction and reinstallation, Hood Downtown will present an ambitious series of exhibitions featuring contemporary artists from around the world. Like the Hood Museum of Art, Hood Downtown is free and open to the public.

Summer 2018 Hours

Wednesday–Saturday, 11:00 a.m.–7:00 p.m.

Sunday, 1:00 p.m.–5:00 p.m.

Closed Monday and Tuesday

Directions and Parking

Hood Downtown is located at 53 Main Street, Hanover, NH. Metered public parking is available in front of Hood Downtown on Main Street, and behind the exhibition space in a public lot between Allen and Maple Streets. An all-day public parking garage is located at 7 Lebanon Street.