

Odili Donald Odita

Shadowland

January 15 – February 28, 2026

New York

Press Release

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present *Shadowland*, an exhibition of paintings, photo collages, and a mural by Odili Donald Odita as well as two works from the 1970s by the artist's father, Dr. Okechukwu Emmanuel Odita (b. 1936, d. 2025). This marks the artist's second solo presentation with the gallery, on view in New York at 520 W. 20th St. from January 15 through February 28, 2026. An opening reception will be held on Thursday, January 15, from 6 to 8 PM.

Shadowland considers three distinct bodies of work—current, past, and inherited—as integral parts of a creative whole, one that not only reveals the evolution of Odita's formal interests, but also connects his practice as a Nigerian American artist to familial and geopolitical legacies. This expanded presentation makes clear the artist's longstanding engagement with some of our most insoluble contemporary questions regarding power: how it manifests, how we perceive it, and how it can be confronted, reclaimed, or created from nothing. At the same time, Odita looks to painting itself as a site of infinite potential, one that fosters possibilities for connection and coexistence across borders, generations, and experiences.

Framing this exhibition is the notion of the shadowland, evoking a time and place thrown into darkness. But just as oppressive ideologies foment in landscapes of ignorance and fear, so too can shadows create protected zones, out of public view, for political action and creative freedom, as in underground movements of resistance and experimentation. Seen as energetic arenas of play, Odita's abstractions wield a liberated, sensory force all their own. Throughout the exhibition, shadows appear where singular hues and values meet, while shapes suggestive of negative space become interchangeable with those forms the eye perceives as material. Interlocking rays and tessellations subvert hierarchical ideas of composition by deemphasizing any presumed center, instead directing the eye across, inside, and out toward peripheries. Elsewhere, Odita's compositions capture division and collision as readily as they encourage the quieter power of reflection. Where patterns unfold from an implied X or central seam, otherwise unified fields become inexact mirror images whose similarities far outweigh their differences.

If Odita's recent paintings serve as sophisticated responses to our current political climate, a lesser-known body of photo-based artworks speaks to an incisive criticality that goes back decades. Culled from a collection of found images and advertisements that the artist calls *The Black Album*, the carefully selected and digitally manipulated works on view reveal subtexts of white supremacy in everyday America. Isolated from their mass-produced context and enlarged to painterly scale, the paired magazine covers in *Vogue* (1997) diagram, by the logic of comparison, how racial stereotypes are produced and disseminated. In a continuation of this critique, the subtle manipulations of the *Vogue* cover in *The White Issue* (1997–1999) emphasize and complicate the implied whiteness that undergirds the stereotypical pillars of female beauty. Throughout *The Black Album*, Odita's sustained inquiry into the notion of the Black body through engagement with mass media further demonstrates how formal choices replicate thematic subjects.

In suggesting what exists behind or before, the shadowland also points backward, toward origin stories. The two paintings on view by the artist's father galvanize an important link between Odita's syncretic approach to abstraction and his closely held proposition that artmaking is an inherently political act. Born in 1936, Dr. Okechukwu Emmanuel Odita, who died in May 2025, was a Nigerian artist, art historian, and academician who—prior to becoming the first Black Africanist to teach African art history in the United States—belonged to a student group called the Zaria Rebels, formed at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology in 1958. Against the backdrop of Nigeria's struggle for independence, the Zaria group challenged their art department's Eurocentric curricula, proposing, instead, the study of traditional African art forms, techniques, and themes—approaches that spoke more directly to their local concerns and lived experiences.

By extension, Emmanuel Odita's paintings counter Western interpretations—and fantasies—of African art by expressing a singular modernism no less radical than those of his American and European contemporaries. As abstract coalescences of color, shape, and line, Emmanuel Odita's figures seem engaged in a living process of becoming, one whose qualities of movement and dimensionality echo across the rhythmic formations of Odita's paintings a generation later. Odita explains, "My understanding of my world has really come from looking at his world. There [is] an understanding of how a representational space can become an abstract form. To look at his paintings gave me a door into what painting could be. It was like an open door to think, Oh. A shape can move a color." In the immersive mural at the back of the gallery, Odita furthers his father's conception of the human figure as a physical and temporal presence, in this case conceptualized as the viewer themself, standing before an array of colors that slash, splice, recede, and otherwise compose the world around them.

Extending far beyond the canonized histories of hard-edge abstraction with which Odita typically associated, his oeuvre is equally informed by the complex geometries of Mbuti barkcloth, the interactivity of the cinematic screen, the auditory experience of music, the language of graphic design, and the objects, textiles, and clothes, both Nigerian and American, that populated his childhood. The diversity of this list points toward the deeply human impulses, at once idiosyncratic and universally shared, that have motivated artists for millennia. Odita says, "One has to understand the context from which the person is speaking, and the platform from which they're addressing their references." Rather than limit our interpretations of artworks to the restrictive lens of Western art history, Odita argues that "it would be better to ask, 'What are [these artists] actually talking about? Where does this sound, this visual vibration, come from?'"

Songs from Life, Odita's large-scale commission for The Museum of Modern Art in New York, is on view through spring 2027. A mid-career survey of Odita's work, *A Survey of Context*, was presented at the Abroms-Engel Institute for the Visual Arts in Birmingham, Alabama (2024) and traveled to the Hyde Collection in Glens Falls, New York (2025). Other solo exhibitions of Odita's work have been presented at institutions including Contemporary Dayton, Ohio (2024); Boca Raton Museum of Art, Florida (2024); Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia (2020); Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami (2019); and Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (2015). Recent group exhibitions include *Giants: Art from the Dean Collection of Swizz Beatz and Alicia Keys*, Brooklyn Museum, New York (2024); *New Grit: Art & Philly Now*,

Philadelphia Museum of Art (2021); *Generations: A History of Black and Abstract Art*, Baltimore Museum of Art (2019); *How We See: Materiality of Color*, Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis (2019); *An American City: Eleven Cultural Exercises*, FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art, Cleveland (2018); *Prospect 4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp*, New Orleans (2017); and *Think with the Senses – Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense*, 52nd Venice Biennale, Italy (2007). His work is in the permanent collections of institutions including the Baltimore Museum of Art; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Pérez Art Museum, Miami; Philadelphia Museum of Art; SFMOMA, San Francisco; and The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Odita lives and works in Philadelphia.