McGlynn, Tom. “Odili Donald Odita with Tom Mcglynn.” *The Brooklyn Rail* , October 6, 2020. Online.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Art | In Conversation

ODILI DONALD ODITA with Tom McGlynn

“Then I started to realize that any color is African color. You just have to be able to go beyond these preconditions that limit your thinking.”

Odili Donald Odata, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

This past July I had the pleasure of discussing Odili Donald Odita’s work with him, live on Zoom, in the context of the Rail’s New Social Environment series. Over the last few decades I’ve tracked the way in which Odita has brought a renewed sense of purpose to abstract painting. In both his individual paintings on canvas and in his wall-sized commissions he exerts a rigorous draftsmanship and a very particular palette that I was anxious to discover more about. Working in the general vicinity of formal abstraction myself, I was curious to hear another such painter’s take on the continued valency of abstraction: its purpose past “purposelessness” perhaps. In our present moment of hyper-pluralistic aesthetic investigation (and social and political upheaval and evolution) Odita explores with me here that limit where the assumptions of the abstract painterly tradition ends, and the potentialities of its extended relevance begin. What follows is an edited transcript of our discussion.

Tom McGlynn (Rail): Good to have this chance to talk, Odili. I’ve considered your work for a long time and having this opportunity get into it comprehensively is a real pleasure. As you know, I’m an abstract painter too. Perhaps we can begin with the whole question of formalism and abstraction. I know that you’ve

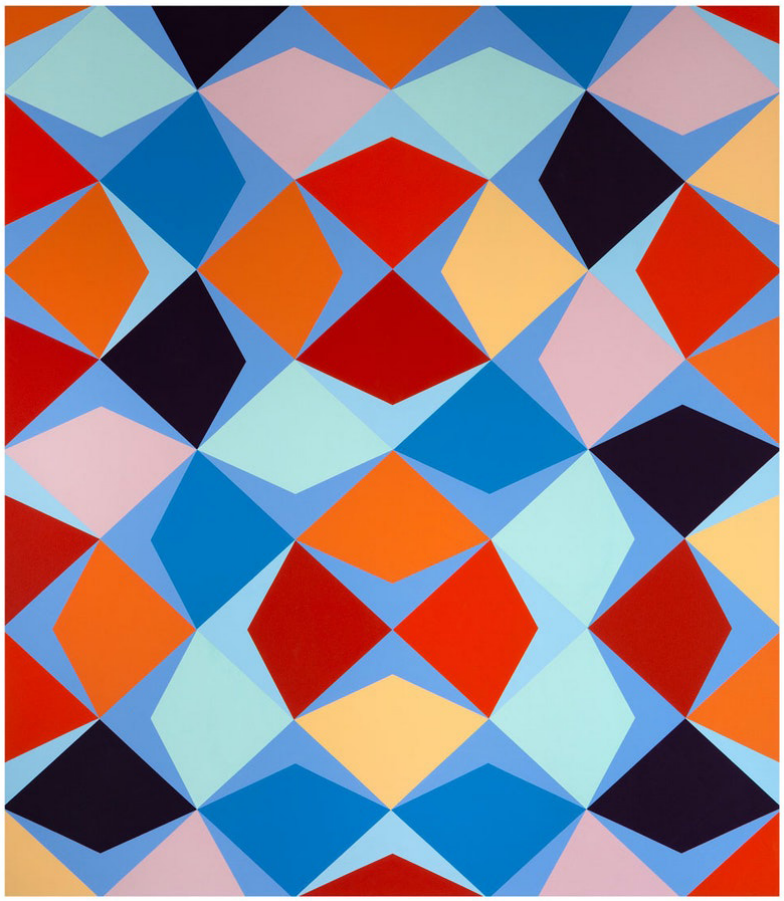
made a reference somewhere that people in general don’t like or understand formal abstraction on some level. So I thought it might be interesting to parse some of the formal symbolism in your work, for instance how you deploy the diagonal. There is that apocryphal story of Mondrian and van Doesburg having a serious falling out over the latter’s introduction of a diagonal into *De Stijl*, yet beyond a purist creed the diagonal also obtains a range of mixed cultural meanings. The graphic art of your Nigerian heritage, and it’s Yoruban mythology of Shango, uses diagonals to symbolically indicate a lightning strike which correlates with the intervention of knowledge, enlightenment. And going back to the genesis of utopian thinking in abstraction you see the diagonal prevalent in the Rayonist compositions of Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov. Then of course there’s the Barnett Newman “zip.” And besides these cultural and art historical instances, on a basic design level the diagonal can indicate the indeterminacy between the more stable vertical and horizontal orientations.

Odili Donald Odita, *Mirror 2*, 2019, Acrylic latex paint on aluminum core fabricated wood panel on reconstituted wood veneer, 92” x 52” inches. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Odili Donald Odita: Thanks for bringing up those references, especially as related to the utopian roots of abstraction. It helps me to go back a little bit into my own project and to remember that when I initially started it, there were aspects that I wanted to engage: information pertaining to cinema and television at the time, and now, even greater so, a relationship to the internet. But I was also thinking about a kind of utopia that would be linked to an idea of the United Nations. This idea of the nations united for the pursuit of peace and freedom in the world. This kind of high-minded utopia that came to me through a comic book I had when I was a kid. And looking at a lot of the structure of late or high modernist abstraction, there are a lot of these types of shapes that come into view, you know, from Suprematism, Cubism onward, but they come into use as a kind of quasi-language for late modernist abstraction in the ’50s and ’60s. And so that’s how the painting actually started, thinking about those ideas in the sense of my being Nigerian, raised in America, and experiencing aspects of this utopian ideal, but seeing it fail in so many places.

I wanted to engage the painting project from that point forward. I came of age

as a student in the 1980s looking at “Neo Geo,” in particular, and Neo-Expressionism. At the time, there was this criticality based on an “end of history” notion that is also extremely myopically Western. I saw this historical crux for abstract painting as an object that had language, but a language that has become silenced over time with its use. Silenced because those same patterns were to be found everywhere. I would find them on rubber balls at Grand Union and supermarkets like that. Or on wallpaper, or papers in the gift wrap section for a dollar. So you could vicariously get a really fabulous Friedel Dzubas painting that way, you know. So this is the kind of overuse and exhaustion that I saw for abstraction at that time. But to jump to the issue of the diagonal, I liked what you say about the notion of indeterminacy. In fact, for me, the position of change, when you talk about measuring space on an X and Y axis, the Z axis is the diagonal. And that’s about space, entering space or exiting space. It’s the transition from here to there. And in a way it speaks to the physical, it gets it to the third dimensional. And what you say is really important, actually, because in making it more real in the phenomenal sense, it holds for high Modernist abstraction reiterated in the everyday on a Cheetos bag design, for instance. You’re getting this kind of experience in a way that’s maybe missing, misinformed, and misdirected from the original “high” concept or content. But on another hand, it becomes part of the real world. And then in that sense, it’s like, what can we do with it, or how can we take it to another place versus just looking at it as only the failure of modernist painting.



Odili Donald Odita, *Iron Butterfly*, 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 60.25” x 52” inches. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Rail: Right. Everyday abstractions like the circular design on the Wonder Bread logo aren’t beholden to art history necessarily. Yet there’s a circular influence between “high and low” too. The Brillo box was actually designed by an aspiring Abstract Expressionist artist James Harvey. Warhol’s appropriation of it later makes more holistic sense in considering the design’s original genesis. Simultaneously there persists a cultural hierarchy between what’s considered design and art. The critic Frank Getlein meant it as a put-down, in his review in the New Republic in 1957, when he tagged Barnett Newman’s paintings as part of what he termed the “Design Division” of Abstract Expressionism.

Odita: Right, it’s an insult. Like the Italian word design “disegno,” which means drawing. And to me, that’s the best way I can think of design. It’s a form of drawing, a form of structuring and organizing. But when you are engaging with the framing, design as a sense of framing or balance, and with a certain kind of predictability, then I believe it doesn’t have any use or it becomes valueless. And maybe that’s the point when somebody talks about it in the sense of the decorative, or decoration, because it certainly starts to lose meaning when it becomes overly determined in a kind of even-handed balancing act that tends to make it homogenous and boring.

Rail: Right. And a lot of these designs—they’re timeless, immemorial. They can be repetitive yet even in their most boring forms they retain latent symbolic meaning. When I would appropriate and then deconstruct commercial logos for my own painting and then did the research, I’d find, you know, some Celtic origin in the classic General Electric logo or a medieval guild design in the Purina squares.

Odita: But you’re talking about something else there, because you’re talking about the concretization of history. You’re talking about history and time of people being collapsed into this kind of design motif. And when you look at those kinds of things, what you see is endless shifts—endless shifting shapes, endless shifting space, endless shifting patterns. It just multiplies endlessly. And that’s the kind of thing that I think is magic. And I’m actually interested in that sort of sort of approach, where you can go beyond predictability and go beyond basically, maybe the structure of the square, you know.

Rail: Yes, and one other thing that I came to mind when thinking about diagonals was thinking about them as kind of like free radical orthogonals if we think of the history of Western painting as determined by the ordering of perspectival symbolic form. It seems to be what you’re doing is taking that diagonal perspective orthogonal and distributing it across the lateral expanses of your paintings.
Odita: You’re bringing up the idea of the horizon—the horizontal, and the horizon as well. When I was younger as an undergraduate in art school, I really loved the artist Blinky Palermo, who would talk a lot about the peripheral. And this idea of seeing something at the corner of your eye, at the edge, and for me over time—and this understanding I have is through some very generous help from a friend, Rochelle Feinstein, when she was a teacher of mine at Bennington College. We

talked about the space of the square, and the idea of space within the edge of the square, the canvas. Rochelle said within that space is the center of the world, and that everything outside of the edge of the canvases is non-existent. This comment was in relation to a painting I had made with mulch and wires extending beyond the canvas’s edge.

Later, I came to understand in the 1990s that the peripheral is also the space of the Other. That everybody and everything else that’s not necessarily important nor significant in the space at the center of the West is placed outside of that canvas square. So, when I’m dealing with horizon, I’m trying to think of a couple of things. The idea of landscape, and in particular, with the paintings I want it to be able to picture multiple things: the scape of cinema, the scape of say, a comic book panel, the scape of a television screen with its test pattern, and also the scape of say, the tourist who goes to some place to dream and vision. So, in that sense, I felt as if I was painting my imaginary Africa. And I was looking at it from the outside, and not from within. I was looking at it like this. And my body then becomes the vertical, in the sense that my body becomes the *zip*; that’s the Barnett Newman *zip*. In this sense he’s remaking the landscape space of a Caspar David Friedrich painting.

In my context, the painting itself was this atmospheric landscape space and the viewer became that tourist, that dreamer, looking into this space. That’s when I realized this whole thing about the body and the significance of it, with a relation to the painting. When I got to the installations and then started seeing people do that for themselves, it confirmed my concept of placing the body in the viewer’s position with the painting. But at that time I was only coming at it from the idea of one-point perspective. With the wall installations I saw the expansiveness of space and time being extended in that experience, and then to see the audience without instruction, finding a place within the wall painting and asking a friend to take their picture right at that spot. It just rammed full circle to what I was thinking originally about the idea of landscape, body, positioning, and space.

Rail: That transition from painting as image to canvas as place. Speaking of place, you’ve provided us with some autobiographical information about your family origins in Nigeria.

Odita: Yes, this image is of the Zaria Art Society in 1958, the inaugural year of the society in the Fine Art department of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology. Subsequently the school was renamed the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The Zaria Art Society were also called the Zaria Rebels. The person who is standing in the back row, just at the other side of the bow tie fellow, that’s my dad who was part of this group. Why it’s significant for me—beyond just my family ties—is the fact that this is where social change actually starts. It starts with students, it starts with people who are young like this. From the protesters out there today to the protesters in America in the ’60s, to protesters in Western Europe, in the ’60s and ’70s, to the protesters in the different countries within the continent of Africa. All of them have the same impetus of wanting to change their universities, or wanting to change the way in which they’re being educated in

this specific case: to have it better fit and adapt to the realities that they want to speak to in their work. And in this case, they were challenging the curriculum to be able to get to more purposeful content in their work that was about local politics, local ideas, and local vision rather than, say, Western European expressions through art. So, this to me is a picture that symbolizes the way in which I want to approach my painting, which ultimately is with the idea of freedom.

Zaria Art Society/Zaria Rebels, 1958. From left, front row: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo, Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko. Back row: Oseluka Osadebe, Late Nwagbara and Emmanuel Okechukwu Odita, all seven of the eight early members of Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) . Photo: Bruce Onobrakpeya Foundation.

When I look back at how I was educated, it wasn’t really about what I could do with possibility, in as much as how well I could recite the laws of painting, particularly Western painting. It was all about making paintings to recite what I was taught, rather than to use the skills and tools to make something brand new. And this is also respective to the idea of content, being able to speak about things that mattered to me, versus having to speak about things that mattered to Western art. So this is that. And then I did this conceptual, photo-based work called *Authentic African* in 1997. It’s really an American question that I got most of my life growing up in the suburbs in Ohio. And so this is an image of myself in different symbolic African costumes with a “yes” or “no” test bubble underneath each image for the viewer to guess, and maybe pick the correct “authentic African.”

Rail: It’s illuminating to see this early work, I’m most familiar with your later paintings.

Odita: After I left graduate school, I went to Ohio State University. Then I went to Bennington College, and then I was in New York and you know, trying to work and make my “late high modernist work.” Ultimately, I just stripped it all down to house paint on canvas. But at a certain point, I stopped painting because I didn’t feel that painting was really questioning all of the reality I was experiencing in

New York, particularly in the early ’90s with the onset of identity politics. So I went into photo-based work. I realize in hindsight that in my photo-based work, I was still thinking as a painter, but in the case of the work, I think it was hitting on content that at the time I didn’t feel that painting could address.

Odili Donald Odita, *Authentic African*, 1997. Digitally manipulated photo, 40 x 30 inches each. Collection of the New School, New York.

Rail: That leaves the viewer thinking, you know, “Is this like a behavioral exercise?” or, “What is my appropriate response to this behavioral exercise.”

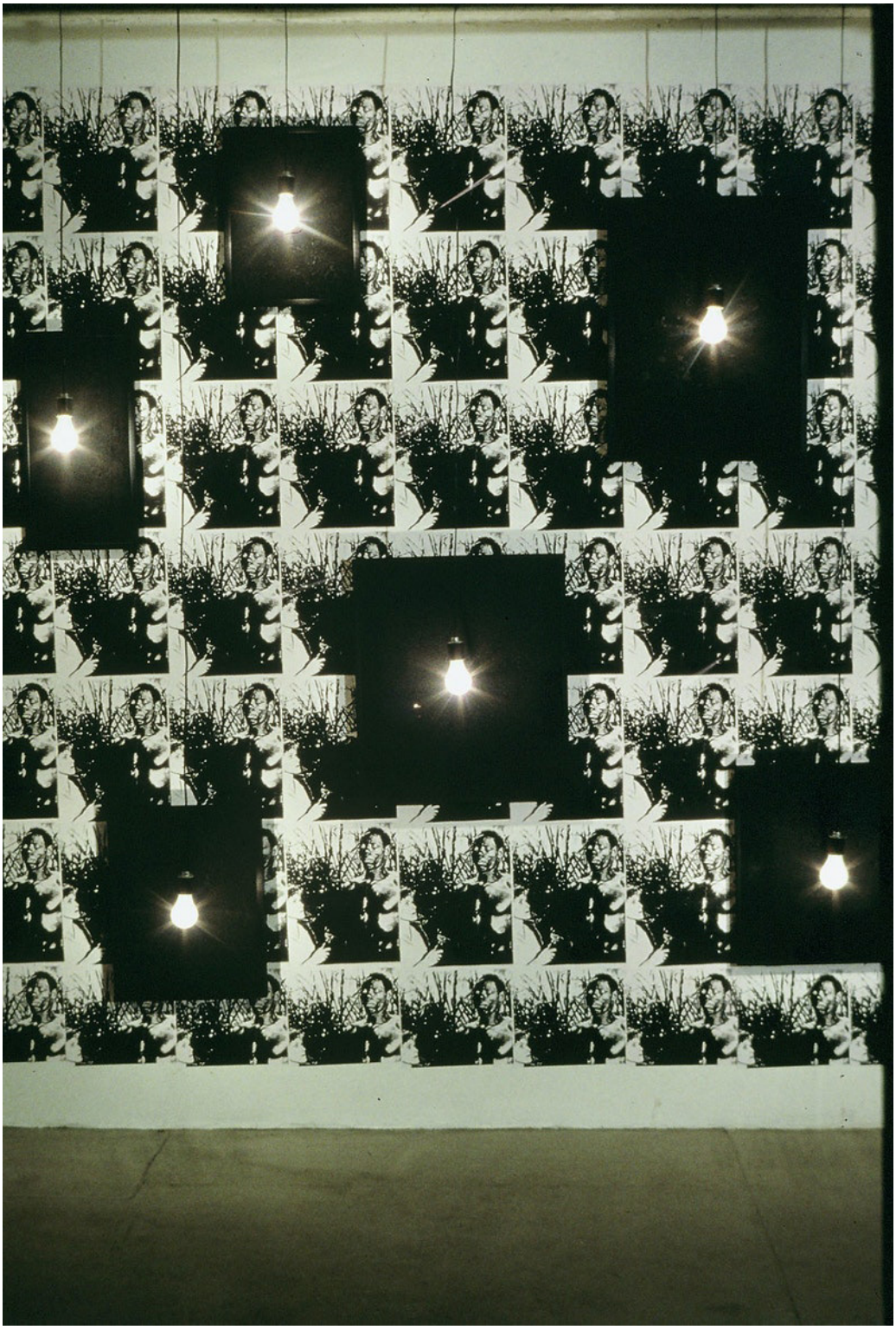
Odita: And another work from that time, *Object* (1999) was made up of photocopies. That wallpaper in the back are photocopies of a still from a film called *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). The image is of a Black male being found with a flashlight by a white female. I was thinking a lot about the idea of the discovery of Africa as this dark continent. The light bulbs in front of the black pigmented rectangles are formal parallels to what’s happening in the image where, again, it’s this discussion between white and black and using the idea of value scale to speak about the work in this particular context. And so, it’s heightening this notion of discovery. And then at the end of the day, for me the title implies an action and a connection for me: I “object.”

Rail: I could see in this piece too the formal aspect of the arrangement coming in: the grid format.

Odita: Yes, I’m making space. I’m making space in a flat context. Yet there are a multitude of them: the photograph space, the photocopied space, the electronic space, the space of the pigmented—those rectangles actually have material that you can see on them; you could touch them. So it’s this other kind of tactile

space. So the senses are being incorporated in many different ways. It’s this polyrhythmic thing that art can do.

Rail: And it refers back to what you were talking about in formal and symbolic terms, of the lateral extensivity of the space, rather than the limit being, you know, the square.



Odili Donald Odita, *Object*, 1999. Photocopies, light bulbs, wire and lighting fixtures, framed pigmented panels on wall, approximately 8 x 9 feet.

Odita: Right. I love that about cinema too, just the idea of the big screen, the idea that it’s endless, and the idea of the pictures versus the text. At the end, you get the credit texts that just rotate upward. And for me, it was always, where does this begin? It begins on one edge, ends at the other edge, but does it continue—does it literally continue? You have that *Star Wars* opening where the letters are made to go pyramidical into the space, perspectival, but in the case of this film ending, it just goes up and then it disappears. But what happens after that edge? And that was always my question relating to information, relating to culture, relating to ideas and societies.

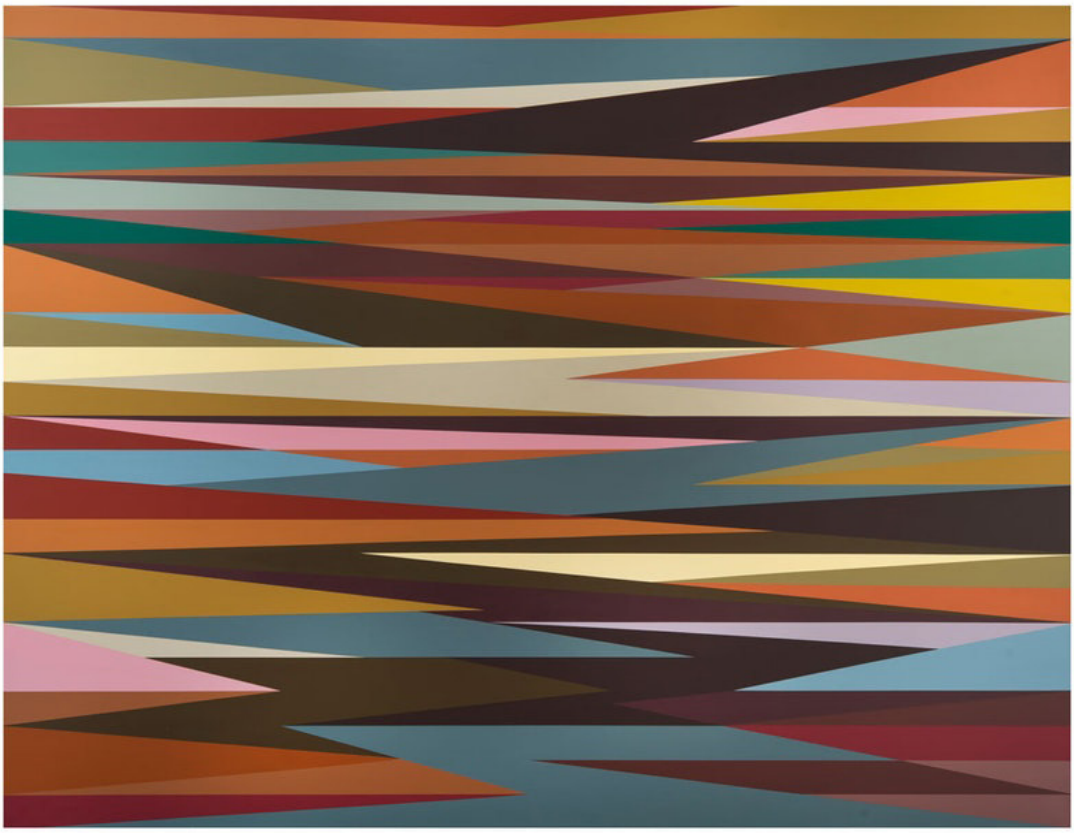
Rail: You could probably critique that *Star Wars* perspective prologue as pretty reactionary. [*Laughs*] It’s much more interesting to see the credit’s vertical scrolling counteract the illusionistic depth of a film: shallow against this cinematic picture, this grand lateral extension held in tension with basic information.

Odita: That’s very perceptive of you. Over time, I’ve come to understand that perspectival space is not as big or as dominant as cubistic space. There’s more space in Cubism than there is in perspectival space. And why? It’s because we have the computer. The infinite virtual space of the computer mimics Cubist space. When you think of the idea and notion of what the computer screen is, what it does, with all its hypertexts boxes. And then with imagination that happens and comes into being, in the fact that you’re absorbing information of all kinds, reading things, looking at things and imagining things. You’re realizing that this relationship is expansive, more than the quasi-literal of perspective. And it’s not to say—it’s not to put a downer on figuration. For me, the best figuration is highly abstract in the way that it deals with its items, those things that we look at in figurative paintings, versus the ways in which the best abstraction can bring us to a sense of reality that is more, that can be as real as what we see and touch around us, and hear and feel around us. And it’s not that abstraction is a limitation, but it’s in fact a means of getting to the point and opening oneself up to possibility.

Rail: There’s an early Barnett Newman painting entitled *Death of Euclid* (1947). Its title is fairly unambiguous about mourning the inherited representation in the West of three-dimensional space as indicative of “The Real.”

Odita: Yeah, it’s so simple, right? So beautiful. I did this painting, *Powerline*, in 2003. There is this particular yellow-white line in the middle of the painting that was very significant to me at the time I was making this painting, because of the way it cut through the space. And now I look at it with some better sense of knowledge of what I did. I’m dealing with these value vibrations, and these chromatic hues, and there’s a certain overall dullness or darkness in the space. When I squint and look at it, I can see that the other colors operate as a tonal space. There’s an energy in the yellow-white shapes that in fact, makes them almost like flashlights in a darkened space. I thought of them simply as an electrical powerline, but I can also metaphorically go into different kinds of considerations of what this is meaning. And then on another level, I was beginning to think of these

abstractions as physical spaces in a realistic sense, and so that darkened color, that brown-black shape that’s in there, to me, it becomes the shattered body. So, this ripping line that gets dismembered becomes my body, or a Black body that’s electrified, or body that’s stretched as a result of this powerline. “Beam me up, Scotty,” you know. It’s particularized, it’s molecularized, and it’s being moved through space.



Odili Donald Odita, *Power Line*, 2003. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 109 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: I’ll make these anecdotal associations of my own because of the suggestion of the title. For me, in the middle of this painting there’s kind of like a lag, you know. There’s that weight of a powerline. But also simultaneously there’s this refractory energy. An interesting tension exists between the drawing which is “weighted” in the middle and the refractory energy, when you’re talking about the light in the dark room or something like that, or a diamond where one facet is refracting more light than another. So despite anecdotal illusion the indeterminacy of abstraction like this is expansive. It’s not reductive to mere symbolic representation.

Odita: Right. I don’t want it to just sit, rest still, and be predictable. Movement has always been very much a part of the work considering my sources in music, thinking of speed and time, thinking of distance, remoteness and place. When you understand the nature of the relationship between drawing and color, or drawing and painting, the simplicity of this relationship can produce so much enormity. You realize that you kind of have the world at your fingertips. This of course demands that I have to trust myself, and trust my sense of drawing, which

my dad, my father, being an artist/art historian, impressed upon me. And it’s everything. And so, it helps to control, and hold, and paint, and it helps to make paint and color become space. But you have to be able to understand how drawing and painting can relate to each other.

When I was working as a visiting artist in one of Robert Bordo’s classes at Cooper Union, he made mention to me that Franz Kline made sketches of his paintings on Post-it paper, and then basically blew them up. So I was like, “Oh, so that’s why the drawing in his painting is so awkward.” Because it’s just a blow up of something, rather than, “How does drawing that sits in one space work when you move the drawing over to another space?” Because the fact that painting, just like anything else, is not the same from one context to the next. Where the painting is representationally situated—as a copy for instance—does not make it the same thing. Also, as an object, if it’s hung in this place, place A, and then hung in place B, it’s not the same experience. So, it’s to understand how things can change, and how there’s a certain kind of organic, and physiological, and psychological thing that happens in each moment.

Rail: Most everybody inherently understands the kind of situational awareness you describe between objects and their placement. It’s imprinted since infancy. Artists tend to be a bit more sensitive to the indeterminacy of the objects they create simply because they are objects “self-made” and not simply encountered as inevitable in the world. So the mutability of an object’s existence is something they instinctively play with. And that contingent, moving, meaning can be then incorporated into their work.

Odita: Well, it’s called strength, and particularly, confidence in being able to say that you can allow yourself to do something if there’s a certain awareness that’s imbued in that trust, that something’s at stake. And that’s what makes trust so righteously valuable, because you’re not just saying, “Oh, I trust myself. Where’s my chewing gum?” It’s like, “I trust myself, and I know that I can fall off this rope doing it, but I trust myself to go across this space in any case.” For instance, in this painting called *Nomad* (2012), I was really starting to restructure the way that I wanted to deal with painted space.

I thought of this as a top, middle, and bottom, and the top and the bottom kind of relate and connect to each other, and this middle portion is like a field of play. This field of play is a play, maybe of clusters, groupings, dismemberment, formations and reformations, and space within space within space within space. But the idea of “Nomad” as a title was reflective of this kind of traveling body in as much as the way in which all these spaces shift, these colors and spaces shift with no sense of apparent location within the painting. It’s being able to allow that to happen versus over-determining things in advance of the experience. I think this is particularly important when you want to understand work that’s not from, say, your foundation, or your space. I really dislike the way in the West that a lot of artists like Alma Thomas, Jack Whitten, Sam Gilliam, Howardena Pindell—how any of these artists, as profound as they are, in certain cases, Norman Lewis, they were taken as second-rate artists, only because the frame was Western art.

The thing is that one has to understand the context from which the person is speaking from, and the platform from which they’re addressing their references. So, I cannot look at Carolee Schneemann and compare her unfavorably to let’s say, Robert Morris. She has a different set of considerations that she’s engaging in the work to make it what it is. And what has happened to a lot of these Black artists is that because they saw their forms, their materials, their drawing, their concepts, let’s say their visual concept, their formal concepts only as, “Oh, it relates to our guys. Okay. We’ve seen this before.” So then it’s declared as second-rate, which is just totally incorrect. It would be better to ask, “What are they actually talking about? Where does this sound, visual vibration come from? How does this visual context exist within the history of America, and not in an one-note America story, but within the entire scope of America’s history?”

At present there’s a massive reeducation that’s happening in art. Even as we see this in the ongoing protests from George Floyd’s murder. There’s a massive re-education. In the least, people of all kinds are starting to reflect on George Floyd, “Oh, this guy died without mercy given to him by the police, and he has a family, and some people will miss him. Oh, he’s a human being.” Let’s actually start to consider that Black people are human beings. Here, we can say the same thing in art, “Oh, these artists are human beings, and they have experiences that are unique to themselves as human beings.” And let’s try to engage those ideas to see why this thing exists as it does versus the same old, “It doesn’t look like our stuff, or, it looks like the stuff that we’ve seen before, so it must be second rate.”

Rail: Right. As with a painter such as Bob Thompson and his relation to the influence of Matisse, one could say that his work was “second-rate” Matisse, as you say, and by doing that simultaneously potentially deny his historical relation to that painterly progression. As if Thompson was completely unaware of that stylistic relation.

Odita: Thompson’s color is profound, as is Stanley Whitney’s unique palette. The way he explores and deals with color is unique. Same thing with Jack Whitten, for example. And that’s to be seen exactly in Bob Thompson and to be understood that way. But I’ve encountered certain so-called knowledgeable experts who’ve said, “Oh, that second-rate guy yada-yada-yada, like a Basquiat.” I could not believe it.

Rail: Basquiat is an interesting case because of his openness to influence. One can think about Basquiat assimilating Guston and de Kooning and that’s his prerogative as well. Pollock’s assimilation of Siqueiros didn’t necessarily make his style derivative. The question is why is the assimilation seamless if it’s done by someone who’s only considered within a dominant, often exclusive, narrative of influence.

Odita: Yeah. It’s been brought up in my work as well. The critic and curator, Stamatina Gregory wrote about it. She wrote about how I’m doing a reverse of “assimilation,” by taking something back from abstraction and using abstraction to bring new possibilities, not only as reclamation, but to revitalize it in a way in

which it might have been vital before, or to revitalize it in the way that it can be something different now.

Rail: Right? And you know that comes back to that idea of the utopian in abstraction, which can be seen as romantically retardataire: we were once believers and it’s not possible anymore. Much of the imperative of Postmodernist theory is proscription against projecting a romantic subjectivity onto a utopian collectivity.

Odita: I think the thing ultimately is to respect the notion that there were high stakes put into abstraction and there are high stakes put into art in general, in the progression of art, and the progression of painting. And for all of us to be able to come to a sense of the depth of painting, or the depth of art is to on one hand, understand that our relationship to monuments has changed in the way in which you see people out there now, pulling down monuments off of their pedestal.

It’s to say that the situation has changed. It’s not to disregard the intent from the beginning up till now. But it’s to see how—and this relates to an idea my dad has always told me, that tradition and those values stay alive if and when they adapt to the present, and when they become useful and still maintain use value in the present. So it’s not about maintaining something just because it happened. But to find ways in which what has happened is still useful, in use and in value today.

Rail: Yes, basically a Dewey-like pragmatism.

Odili Donald Odita, *Great Divide*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 74 x 90 inches. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Odita: This next painting is *Great Divide* from my show in 2017. Conceptually it’s doing a lot of things. In a way it mirrors itself. It mirrors itself and yet breaks that idea of over-determined balance and harmony by the ways in which color shifts to basically break the framing, or break the structure of closure. And then there’s this dividing line which has a certain color. It’s like a red-brown color, maybe it’s a space of skin, or of an idea. Maybe this is the space which makes noticeable the divide within a geography, or within a landscape. So, is it a question about modernity and the space of painting? Is this, is this brown line breaking that color space? Is it shifting, re-shifting the notion of a holistic space?

Rail: The title is initially very allusive. But when I look at what’s happening with color, with that dividing line, I think of Josef Albers’s middle color exercise—how the middle color is this kind of demilitarized zone between assimilative or contrasting colors, but it always winds up being a rather undersaturated light or dark color. Albers’s formal exercises are experiential yet one can also extrapolate other meanings from them. For instance, the undersaturated color in the middle could take on political content: it simultaneously unifies and separates the two colors it mediates.

Odita: Albers’s *Interaction of Color* is amazing to me, because it’s so much about this idea of this possibility of having a better world. Because he talks about interaction, and interactivity. And that space you’re talking about, that third color. What I understand and how I teach it to students, I say, you know that third color is not just a mix of one and two, it’s not literal. If you’re talking about painting, for instance, which is subtractive color, when you mix A with B, it breaks down, it doesn’t build up, it actually breaks down and goes to gray as you mix, so it’s subtractive. But to understand that that virtual third color is not just something less. It’s actually unique, and it’s more. So whatever A is and whatever B is, they don’t have to be hetero, they don’t have to be homo, they just are things separate from each other, and they in turn make a third thing.

Rail: Seems you are speaking to a certain conceptual dimension to that third color. In my own work I’ll sometimes build in what I call a “semantic element,” which functions as a “third color” acting like a qualifying foil or control element to the other colors. One of my recent paintings is titled *Control Group* (2019) in fact. Often that qualifying color is black or a very under-saturated hue.

Odita: That semantic void is actually very important because it implies the space of silence, you know, like Quaker spaces: you have the meetinghouse; you have that empty center. In James Turrell you have the same empty center, and in a lot of his spaces he’s creating these meetinghouses for people to have that silence and contemplate together.

Rail: And you know there are those edges where there’s a simultaneous contrast between color, or light and dark keeps that whole thing perpetually energized. The edge condition creates its own armature integral with the drawing, or *disegno*, of an image. So the relation between energy and repose, sound and silence

applies to painting. Its phenomenology isn’t limited to optics.

Odita: Yeah, and I loved that as a kid. I just loved it in comic books. I’d look for those exact transitions in comics: how the color and the drawing worked together.

Rail: Let’s take a look at some of your installations, like this one at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007.

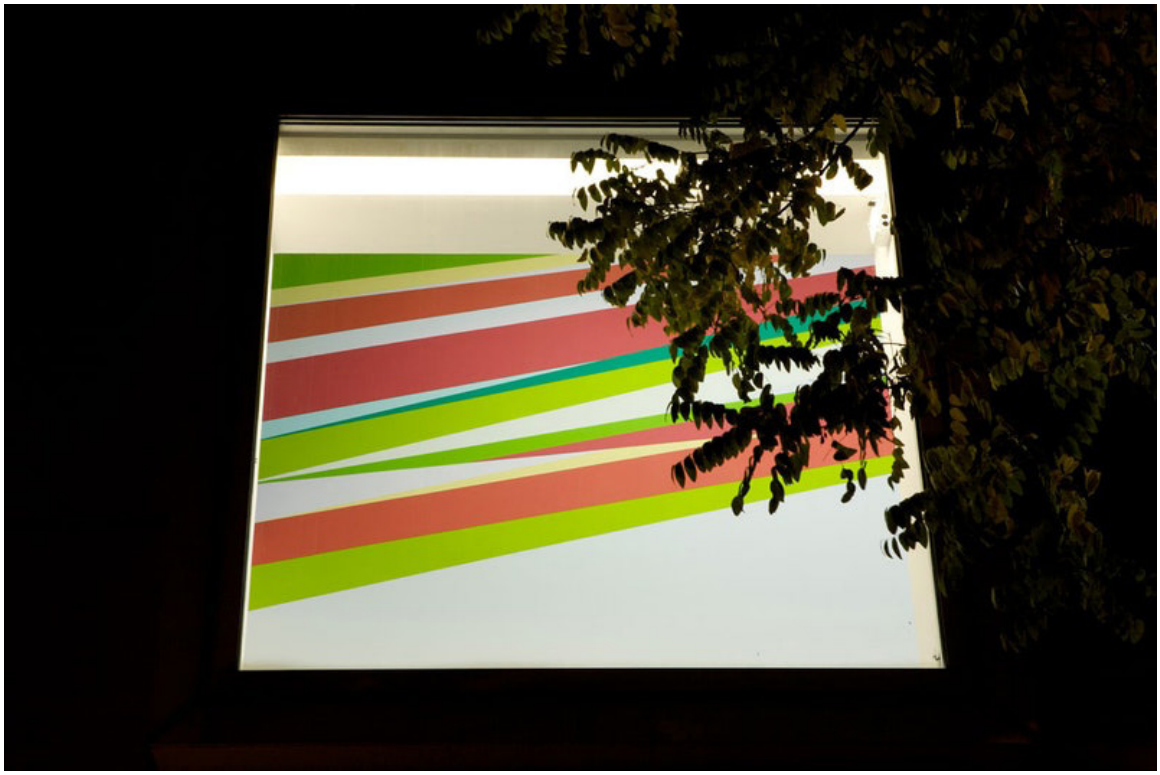
Odita: Okay, this was the space I had, positioned between the black paintings at the very end, which is Sigmar Polke, and the room just before, which contained Nancy Spero’s work. This was the transitional space, so I understood it that way. I conceived it to reflect what I was experiencing in Venice every day during the install. So the color down below represents a type of reflection of light off the water against the arches of the wall above. The light was reflected off the water and the buildings that my family and I would see while cruising in vaporettos from one place to the next. I wanted my work to relate to our real experiences, versus an international artist’s “jet–set” thing of just going to a place, hanging something off of a nail, and then leaving when the opening is done.

Rail: Was it important for you that those places translate to the viewer in the same way you experienced them?

Odita: It’s important for me as a means of motivation. I use it as a way of trying to make something. The clarity of the work is not to be something like a letter, this letter equals that letter, this number equals that number. It’s really about the spiritual and artistic integrity of motivation, just being able to have the reason to make something, and to plan something, and to try to make it work. That’s important to me, because it makes something more real than not real for me. And choosing a specific color is just to say the same thing in another way. You wouldn’t pick up any old kind of color and just throw it onto the space. It doesn’t work like that, because you have different things that happen with color. If you took words from the alphabet and just started sticking them together, sometimes you might accidentally make a clear word, but in most cases you’ll just have gibberish. With color, it’s a matter of really understanding what you’re using and its potency. And the gaming of this work is always about that.

It’s very real for me to ask myself, “What’s my motivation here?” It’s about having a sense of import within myself, a sense of clarity within myself to be able to communicate, and not necessarily letting myself rely only on old tricks, but to use what I know to make something new. And the new is not literally form. It could be the way in which I made the form, and the way in which the form allows me to understand something deeper about form, or the way in which form allows me to understand something deeper about content or motivation, and so forth. It’s about pushing myself, and that’s the ambition that I believe is inherent in the abstraction project, and to what I think the abstraction project is all about; the ambition to be able to reach the center of the mind at the same time as the center of the world, and speak about it.

Rail: What about this other installation, done in Philadelphia in 2008–2009?



Odili Donald Odita, *Third Space*, 2008. Acrylic latex wall paint on wall. Ramp Space Project at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, September 4, 2008–December, 2009. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Odita: This is Third Space at the ICA, at the University of Pennsylvania. And this is a uniquely interesting painting, because you have the painting in this very tall, vertical, narrow, hall space. And all this shifting within the painting is to talk about the shifting of movement in the space. Yet, from another vantage point it becomes a traditional painting, in the sense that you can see everything at once from a single perspective. One has to stand across the street and look at the building to get this view. So, the shifting context of body space in relationship to this installation was profoundly significant to me in my understanding of what’s possible.

Rail: And there’s a similar kind of value interplay, as in your paintings, between something that’s in shadow and something that’s in light. So there’s a dialogue between the installations and the standalone paintings that extends their respective boundaries.

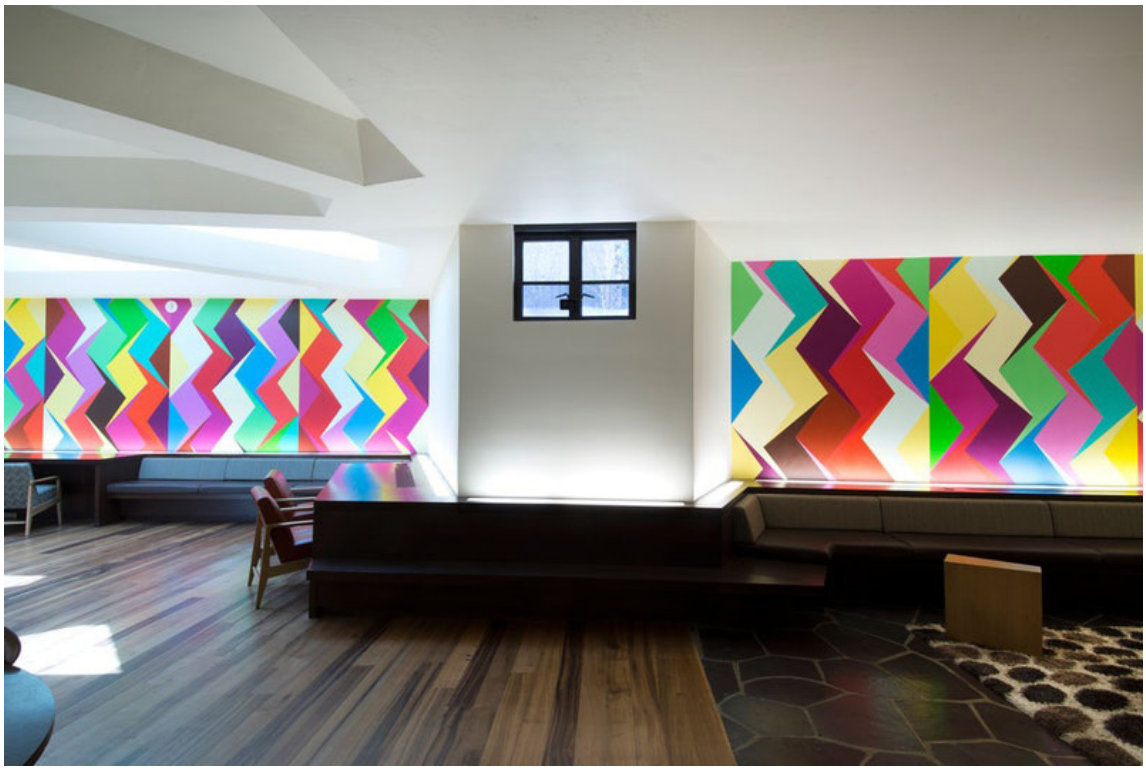
Odita: In fact, my color in my canvas paintings became better after the installations. I had this initial prejudice with color, which I think is really important to understand. When we want to assign too much meaning at the beginning, we can limit things, and hence, we don’t allow them to become whatever is outside of our mind. So, I was making paintings that represented a so-called African color. Over time and through the installation work, that notion became the most ridiculous thing I could ever imagine doing. It’s not that the work before failed, but I’ve understood that there’s no classification that can be put to color that says, this

is Japanese color versus American color. You might have states that have flags, and they use colors, and you might have countries that have flags that use color, but that’s not to say that this represents that space, or that thing. Then I started to realize that any color is African color. You just have to be able to go beyond these preconditions that limit your thinking. It’s another aspect of undoing my education. I had good teachers, but if I talk about white supremacy in the systemic nature of knowledge in the West, I’m going to say that my whole practice is about going beyond that. That’s what all this protest is about. We’re not only going beyond white supremacy or male fascism, we’re going into the space beyond these determinants, maybe even beyond the limits of language itself.

Rail: I think that’s a great point. And I believe you’re describing the political dimension and potential of abstraction. Of course in the past, formalist abstraction has been alloyed with retrograde or even fascist ideology—aspects of how the accelerationist utopia of the Futurists lined up with Mussolini’s rhetoric, for example—but it is more often associated with emancipatory narratives.

Odita: Politics in abstract art, or in art in general, can still exist in a way which not only represents some ideal or idealism, but also in ways in which it projects the force of its form. I’m interested in looking at things of that nature, because it’s about understanding, or responding actually, to sheer power—and understanding how it imagines itself.

Rail: I’d like to talk about one last installation. It looks as if there was a performance involved with it?

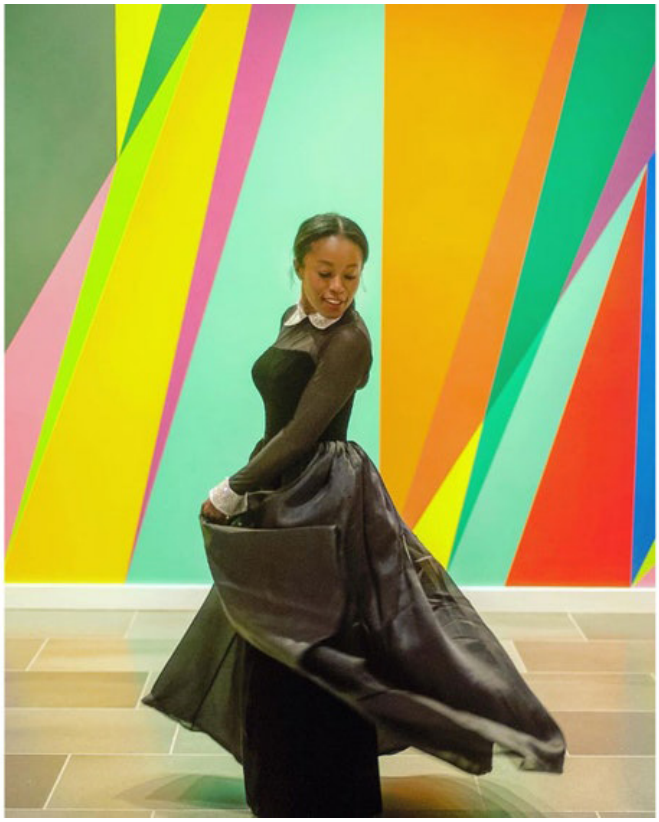


Odili Donald Odita, *RISE*, 2015. Acrylic latex paint on wall. Commission for Ezra Stiles College, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Odita: Yes, this is a piece I did in the commons room at Yale University, Ezra Stiles College in 2015. This picture shows a really beautiful performance to inaugurate the piece. And these images show the social dynamic that’s occurring with the wall installations, how they’re being used by people, and how people are activating them and they’re becoming something else: not just a background, inasmuch as how the energy of the work inspires people, and conversely, how people reflect back the energy in the painting. There’s a back and forth dialogue that’s happening within the space.

Rail: This was conceived as a collaboration with this performance group?

Odita: I was surprised. I didn’t know this would happen. These were students from Yale. They were members of an acapella group called Shades of Yale that performs music from the African diaspora. They wanted to perform in front of this wall. This wall painting was very important for the school, because it is part of the change at Yale to engage more people of color in projects like this on their campus. It is the university’s way of working against some of the histories of whiteness that permeate that institution, and bringing something more reflective of the changing student population at the school.



Odili Donald Odita, *Shadow and Light (for Julian Francis Abel)*, 2015. Acrylic latex paint on wall, Dimensions vary. Commission for the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

A similar event occurred in front of my piece *Shadow and Light* (2015) at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. A dancer unknown to me performing in front of the piece. The installation is in part a commemoration to Julian Francis Abele, an architect who was the primary designer of the West Campus of Duke University (from 1925–1954), but was never able to see those buildings in completion due to Jim Crow laws at the time in the United States. In 1986, there were ongoing protests by students at Duke to have the university divest from apartheid South Africa. A student sent a letter of outrage to the editor of the school paper, stating that the architect of beautiful campus buildings would feel so dishonored by all these protests happening in front of them. Ironically, it was Julian Francis Abele’s grandneice, Susan Cook, who was attending Duke at the time, and wrote the letter that publicly acknowledged Abele’s architectural role at the university, stating that he would have been proud of the protests for change. As a student, Julian Francis Abele was class president of the Architectural Society at the University of Pennsylvania, and was the first African-American to graduate from the Graduate School of Fine Arts. He would later contribute to the designs of more than 400 buildings, including the Widener Memorial Library at Harvard University (1912–1915), the Central Branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia (1917–1927), and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1914–1928). The title of my wall painting, *Shadow and Light*, refers to how Abele had lived for so long in the shadows of history, yet through struggle and eventual understanding, he has since been carried out again into the light of day.

Contributor

Tom McGlynn

Tom McGlynn is an artist and writer based in the NYC area. His work is represented in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, and The Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum of the Smithsonian among other national and international collections. He is an Editor at Large at the *Brooklyn Rail,* contributing articles and criticism since 2012.