



Artist Odili Donald Odita examines American identity, democracy in 'America Today'

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Odili Donald Odita at the exhibition "Odili Donald Odita: Songs from Life," April 8, 2025 – April, 2027. Digital Image © 2025 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. – Photo by Jonathan Dorado.

As the nation looks toward its upcoming 250th anniversary, one Philadelphia artist is prompting a conversation about American identity and the current state of American democracy.

Nigerian-American abstract painter Odili Donald Odita will show original works at three different art exhibitions across the city, with an upcoming exhibit at The Print Center titled "America Today: Voices in Contemporary Print" running April 24 through July 25.

Odita, who came to the United States from Nigeria with his family as refugees of the Biafran War, discussed with the Tribune how his artistic process and subject

matter is informed by his own lived experiences, emphasizing the role art played in helping him adjust to his new surroundings.

"Growing up in America as a refugee from Nigeria during the Biafran War, I was learning about America and acclimating to America through art — television, comic books, things of that nature," Odita said. "Art was an avenue for understanding the world and so many different facets of the world I was growing up in."

Odita attributes much of his early influence to his father, the late Dr. Emmanuel Okechukwu Odita — the first Black Africanist to teach the History of African Art in the United States, and the founder of the History of African Art and Archaeology program at Ohio State University. Odita noted that his parents felt welcomed and supported by Americans at the time of their arrival in the country, a contrast to what he views as regressive present-day rhetoric around immigration and diversity.

"Both my parents passed away last year, but in their letters and what they said to us all throughout the years is that they were welcomed by people here," Odita shared. "It's really shocking to think that in America this standard of [being a] melting pot and achieving avenues of success is being tarnished, and that's absolutely disgusting ... It's something that I never could believe would happen in any lifetime whatsoever."

In the context of America's current sociopolitical landscape, including flash points in Philadelphia about how to examine the nation's past, present and hopes for its future, Americans across the country are divided. Odita describes his own feelings about America's current state as "constantly evolving."

"At first, I couldn't believe we were having this second coming and onslaught against our rights in the U.S.; I'm still trying to understand," he said. "I think that people really care about America in different ways, [but] there is a lot of misunderstanding."

Odita finds that art provides an avenue to better understanding one another, highlighting how his painting "Cut" at The Print Center's exhibit encapsulates how difference and diversity are strengths.

"My piece is an image that is on one hand whole, on another, has this line through it that [makes it look] like it's slipping or falling apart," Odita explained. "There are colors that are close to each other but different and then there are colors that are very different.

"For me those colors are synonymous to people, to ideas, to cultures, to identities," he said. "It's about how they coexist in this space and how they harmonize together, [and how those] differences bring the painting together.

"This is how I see the world in the best sense: that we need to acknowledge our

differences but be able to have our differences work together," he continued. "This is really what America has been, in the way that it's allowed its doors to be open [to these positive influences]."

The artist expressed his view that one of America's greatest strengths lies in its origins and history of diverse groups coming together and shaping it for the greater good.

"I think that one of the greatest things about America is that it is a dream that is unrealized forever for me," Odita mused. "If something is defined and absolute in a locked box, then we are always going to have to change our shape to fit that box.

"But if this box has open walls," he continued, "we can always see the horizon and expand towards it. I think that right now people are standing up and saying 'this is not the way I want this place to be,' and I believe in that action is America."

Considering the multiple exhibits themed around American identity and democracy showing his work, Odita asserts that the interest in these displays addresses a deeper sense of national interest and concern.

"It's amazing to see that the city of Philadelphia is organizing on so many levels to speak to America about the independence of America," Odita said. "It's a certain kind of zeitgeist that all these institutions are engaging in. It's a realization that we have an urgent state of affairs right now and we have to really come to ask this question of 'what is America, and how do we improve it and understand it?'"

Reflecting on life experiences that have influenced and informed his career, Odita expressed enthusiasm, reverence and gratitude in being able to contribute to the ongoing conversation about American identity.

"For me, I'm just happy to be a part of all of this," Odita said. "I'm overwhelmed and elated and happy to be part of the reconsideration of what America is. We're standing up and trying to save democracy by addressing what it might mean in all its different forms and formats.

"I'll be happy if [when we] look back on this time," he continued, "that I can say that I did my part as an artist.

"I'm not taking for granted my luck and success that I've had in this country, because my parents took the risk to come to this country ... and [be part of] this idea of America," Odita said. "For those doors to be closed by a small group of people without consideration of the history of how America allowed their families to come into this place is absolutely shameful — and I don't want to live in shame, or other people's shame."