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ODILI DONALD ODITA

This Nigerian-born painter, inspired by sources ranging from African textiles to TV test patterns, creates vivid mashups of color and geometry. BY HILARIE SHEETS

In the abstract paintings of Odili Donald Odita, shards of individual colors zigzag, angle, and zoom across canvases and large-scale wall installations. Their shifting rhythms and patterns, which can employ as many as 30 vibrant hues, might suggest colliding forces or cultures, overlapping currents or horizons, emotions of dissonance or elation. “You see a duality in my work—the patterns of one world and another world pushing into the space of the painting,” says Odita, who is interested in how abstract language can simultaneously address social, political, and psychological content.

Odita was six months old when his family fled Nigeria at the onset of the civil war in 1967 and landed in the American Midwest. His father, an art historian and painter, taught at Ohio State University in Columbus and kept African traditions alive in their cloistered home. Odita felt isolated in his adopted country, where people of color are often

labeled merely “black,” a term he finds vague and inaccurate. In his work, he never repeats the same tone from one painting to the next and thinks of each color as being as unique and distinct as an individual.

His geometric compositions are informed by sources ranging from African textiles and the landscape of Nigeria—he first returned for a visit at age 10—to TV test patterns, screen savers, midcentury wallpaper, and music. “For me, color is the closest thing to sound,” says Odita, who strives to create the same kind of emotional intensity in his paintings that music can evoke. His tastes include jazz, bluegrass, Scottish bagpipes, and indie rock.

“The way he works with color and space is very dynamic,” says Robert Storr, dean of the Yale School of Art, who taught Odita at Bennington College in Vermont, where the artist received his MFA in 1990. “His palette is full of tonal nuances that you don’t find in ▶

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ART SHOW



The Gate, 2013.



Four States, 2008.



Point of Return, 2010.

the mainstream modernist tradition. If you know something about color in African painting, you'll recognize bits and pieces of it."

After seeing a wall painting in the artist's 2006 show at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, Storr gave Odita his first opportunity to work on a monumental scale when he curated the 52nd International Exhibition at the 2007 Venice Biennale. In an enormous hallway in the Italian Pavilion, Odita painted long horizontal bands of color

that jostled and converged at the corners of the walls, creating a sense of crossroads. "I realized these wall paintings could be in dialogue with the architecture," Odita says. "The piece changed as you moved around it."

The success of that work was followed by installations at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati later that year. Odita has since worked in settings outside the art world, completing a monumental wall painting at New York–Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan in 2012 and the George C. Young Federal Building and Courthouse in Orlando, Florida, in 2013. A piece for P.S. 340 in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood will be completed in 2015. "My work has become very civic-minded," says Odita. He adds that murals in such quotidian settings can offer windows to infinite horizons.

Now based in Philadelphia, where he teaches at Temple University's Tyler School of Art, Odita continually finds other expatriates from places of unrest whose experiences of diaspora echo his own. "I like to hear cultural stories similar to mine to get a sense of how people have learned to adapt to new places," he says. "There's still oppression, but I believe in a human utopia. We can be better than we were yesterday. This is part of what I think of every time I make art." ■



Scan the image above to view more of the artist's work



Give Me Shelter, an installation at the 2007 Venice Biennale.