

BAERT GALLERY

JEBILA OKONGWU [b. 1975]

Jebila Okongwu critiques stereotypes of Africa and African identity and repurposes them as counterstrategies, drawing on African history, symbolism and spirituality. One of his preferred materials is banana boxes; their tropicalized graphics articulate an 'exotic' provenance, much like the exoticization of African bodies from an ethnocentric perspective. When these boxes are shipped to the West from Africa, the Caribbean and South America, old routes of slavery are retraced, accentuating existing patterns of migration, trade and exploitation.

In his series entitled 'Divination Paintings', Okongwu engages with the multi-dimensional realities of traditional African art, a domain that includes legends, myths, ancestors, spirits, death and the cosmos. By creating a process which involves randomly applying triangles of banana box cardboard onto canvas, the artist takes on a role similar to that of the shaman and manipulates random events to transcend his own ego by relaying coded information (and possible revelations) from a sentient cosmos. The graphic elements on the boxes are broken down and reformed to create new visual structures and shimmering optical fields.

Having developed a distinct aesthetic by working solely with collage for several years, Okongwu has recently returned to painting. The visual effect of collage is recreated with oil paint on linen but the artist now has more control of color and tone by mixing the paint. Working with a fluid medium and bristle brushes lends a sensuality to the surface of the work that was not possible with collage and he is now able to subtly alter the logos and texts which are printed onto the boxes, emphasizing both the sociopolitical and personal narratives present in the works.

Okongwu's series of 'Banana Sculptures' consist of formal arrangements of the tropical fruit and playfully subvert the ideals of high Modernist sculpture. He thus reclaims the stolen legacy of African art from the Cubists and repropose his sculptures as totems or sacred objects representing spirit beings. The works are initially sculpted from sections of cardboard which are hand-stitched together and then cast into bronze. By way of this archaic artistic process, Okongwu redefines temporal and spatial dimensions and the ethereal quality of the spirit world is materialized and made permanent.

A recent motif in Okongwu's work is the volcano. Symbols of power and violence, they are also employed as a metaphor to suggest growing social unrest, insurrection against social injustice and hint at the possibility of apocalypse or revolution.

Born in London and then raised in Nigeria and Australia, Jebila Okongwu currently lives and works in Rome. He received a BA in Visual Art from Monash University and a Graduate Diploma in Fine Art from the University of Melbourne. His work has been exhibited at prominent institutions including the American Academy in Rome (2015), the Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples (2014), and the MACRO Museum of Contemporary Art, Rome (2013). His work is featured in the recently released '100 Sculptors of Tomorrow' published by Thames and Hudson.

JEBILA OKONGWU

Born in 1975 in London, United Kingdom
Lives and works in Rome, Italy

EDUCATION

1996

Post-graduate Diploma in Fine Art (Painting), Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, Australia

1993

Bachelor of Arts (Visual Art), Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2019

Jebila Okongwu, Baert Gallery, Los Angeles, USA

2018

Schengen, Villa Romana, curated by Justin Randolph Thompson and Janine Gaelle, Florence, Italy

Manhattan Office, Art in Buildings – 125 Maiden Lane, curated by Jennie Lamensdorf, New York City, USA

2017

The Legitimacy of Brutality, Baert Gallery, Los Angeles, USA

2015

Patterns of Trade (with Ludovica Gioscia), Wunderkammer, Galleria Riccardo Crespi, Milan, Italy

2013

River Crossing, Galleria Lorcan O'Neill, Rome, Italy

Nina & Stevie, MACRO Pelanda, Rome, Italy

2012

The Hawker (performance), Roma Contemporary, MACRO Museum of Contemporary Art, Rome, Italy

The Other Art Fair, Ambika, London, UK

Banana Republic, Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney, Australia

2001

Synthetic Abstractions, Rialto Project Space, Rome, Italy

1999

Jebila Wolfe-Okongwu: Inedito, Futuro Associazione Culturale, Rome, Italy

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2019

Color is an Act of Reason, Baert Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

2017

Unmasked & Liquid State, Axis Gallery, New York City, USA

2015

Nero Su Bianco, curated by Robert Storr, Lyle Ashton Harris and Peter Benson Miller, The American Academy in Rome, Italy

2014

The Go Between: A selection of International Emerging Artists from the Ernesto Esposito Collection, curated by Eugenio Viola, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples, Italy

2013

Un Altro Natale, Casa della Letteratura, Rome, Italy

2012

African and African-Caribbean Design Diaspora: Untold Gold, The Bargehouse, London, UK
Savorr VIII, Samson and Hercules House, Norwich, UK

2011

XXXVIII Premio Sulmona, Civic Museum - Diocesano ex Convento di Santa Chiara, Sulmona, Italy
Fabula in Art, Museum San Salvatore in Lauro, Rome, Italy
Exhibition for International Dialogue and Peace, Iraq Embassy, Rome, Italy

2010

Passion Is The Difference, LipanjePuntin artecontemporanea, Trieste, Italy

2005

Five Painters, Critical Mass, Brooklyn, New York, USA

1999

Simbiosi: Il Segno e il Simbolo, Gallese Museum of Contemporary Art, Gallese, Italy
12 Artisti: Collettiva d'Arte Contemporanea, Extra Gallery, Rome, Italy
Riot, Vernice Associazione Culturale, Mattatoio di Testaccio, Rome, Italy

RESIDENCIES

2018

International Guest Artist Residency, Villa Romana, Florence, Italy

2017

Art Omi, Omi International Art Center, Ghent, New York, USA