

SNWY

art,
contemporary,
african.

Edition 1 Featuring:

Odili Donald Odita,
Otobong Nkanga,
Lynette Yiadom-Boakye,
Simon Njami,
Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie,
Riason Naidoo,
Chimurenga.

(Re-) Mapping the field: a bird's eye view on discourses.

Chromatic Symphony

Interview with Odili Donald Odita

Missla Libsekal

Interviewed by Missla Libsekal (Another Africa) and Ilpo Jauhiainen

Following his recent solo exhibition entitled *Body & Space* this past Autumn in New York, I had the pleasure of interviewing Nigerian-born (b. 1966 Enugu) abstract painter and hard-edged, colour field enthusiast Odili Donald Odita. His oeuvres, architectonic creations on canvas, plexiglass and wall drawings explore the mysteries of colour, its infinite possibilities considering colour anew - as a conceptual space. The journey discovering his work and thoughts behind his practice has been both intellectually and visually stimulating. His rigorous practice, specificity yet instinctual abandon to chromatic freedom create visual vistas ocularly titillating. Viewing his paintings in the flesh, one can easily find themselves lost in time, gazing and seeing different perspectives shapes and forms ultimately experiencing a renewed faith and love of colour.

During our recent telephone interview in December 2010, Odita spoke candidly of his work, his thoughts on colour how it marks, codifies and shapes our world, influences our understanding and perceptions whether it be at loftier heights such as in relation to socio-political constructs or to the mundane yet rather logical extrapolation as to why stop signs are typically red.

MISSLA LIBSEKAL: What are the themes you have found yourself naturally gravitating towards through your paintings?

ODILI DONALD ODITA: Quite a lot of things actually that I've been wanting to push through with the work. I feel as if I have wanted to speak about painting primarily; it's a very important thing for me to speak through. I want to speak to it in a specific way, from a cultured position, from one who is speaking from a certain place in the world, in a certain mindset from within this world.

I want to speak clearly about painting as not only an African but as a human being. It is interesting for me to try to address certain things that I am concerning with, certain things dealing with power relations within cultures, certain ideas that have, that exist underlying in painting that are very in certain ways hegemonic let's say and so there are a lot of different things that I am trying to do within painting. I want to expand the content of colour and the understanding and awareness of colour rather than for it to be assumed and dealt with in a superficial manner as it is in art and painting. As I look at colour, colour can become an enormous conceptual space that has only begun to be scratched in the realm of painting it's always been looked at in a certain political, conceptual way rather than only a technical way.

ML: The understanding of colour in the West is said to be influenced by Chromophobia, Can you tell us what this is?

ODO: I am borrowing the term from David Batchelor whose great book titled *Chromophobia* goes into the whole notion of the fear of colour in Western culture and it's a book that I use extensively with my students in colour class. It's a book that is interesting because when American kids read this book and I am reading in class, they look at it as an attack against them, or a slight against them, and that is very, very important - that reaction and I highlight to students that he is speaking towards Western culture and they already are feeling attacked. What does this say about their awareness if not intuitive, their conscious awareness of their participation, their embodiment of the West - how they embody the West, how they are the West and how they are receiving this argument in this way, this particular way. It's interesting, this book goes into some good scholarly, historical detail into how colour has been perceived, written in texts, philosophies, colour theories in a way that genderizes it, makes it a state of psychosis, puts it in the space of drugs, illicit drug use, talks about colour almost as a state of anarchy and all these sorts of things. This is all in documented, historical, academic official text. You said something really interesting to me about perception and colour, and again I think this is to speak about how we understand colour our perception meaning or being understanding, perception being the way we see, perception being the way we think, and how colours can affect when used well and used interestingly, can affect, modify and maybe change one's perceptions and feelings, thoughts, considerations, a particular point of view.



So I think that there is a lot of power in colour, and there is a lot of distrust in the normal say Western sense of colour, there is a distrust of it because it is used as something that can't be managed quite easily.

ML: Do you think that chromophobia is something that typically occurs only in North America?

ODO: I couldn't say that either because I know the book, *Chromophobia* documents the West very thoroughly but again it's also a book from the West. It's an analysis of Western culture. If I was going to make an analysis say of Nigerian culture, I might get into aspects of chromophobia there too - I wouldn't know where to begin in that sense but I think that that could be the case as well. There might be colour associations, symbolic associations, colour that is related to a symbol that one is to say do not trespass this space, because this colour represents this idea or this particular thing. So in that sense it's about surviving and life is always all about this on one level - you know survival. I think that art is this other level, where it's like how do we live and move beyond only wanting to survive. What is life beyond the mere necessity of survival - where is the beauty of life beyond that and that is when I think - you know wow plants with their colours, they are made to attract bugs so that they can pollinate let's say, or plants with colour, bright colour that are meant to be a warning in nature, that is if you eat this plant you are going to die, drop dead and you know you can start to contemplate those things. How does it happen that we have colours and we actually code things with colours and we identify from plant life to stop signs, colour to help us move through things. Certain colours kind of repeat as a certain understanding, commonalities let's say that goes through certain colours identifies in a certain way, the feeling that we have for red then there is fire then there is blood, then there is a stop sign. It is interesting when you think of it in that sense but you have to think about it, you can't just reduce it to only a stop sign, then I think that colour becomes inadequate and becomes only technical

ML: Living in the Digital Age where computers are a common part of many of our lives, how do you feel this is influencing our experience of colour?

ODO: But always remember that you have the colour from the monitor, colour from an image, and then you have colour entering your eyes from a natural light, from being outside, from being in the sunlight - there are multiple experiences. I'm interesting in the quality of colour generated from machine light, from mechanic light, like a computer or a TV light and what that does.

I am also interested in what happens with colour in nature under the sun, or in the atmosphere. Because I believe that when we experience colour, through our eyes, just through our eyes in the real world we are going to experience infinity - the infinite, the infinite potential - the infinite possibility. When we have man-made, mechanical light we are going to have another kind of experience, it's just going to be flatter, but it can be equally intense - different. Like an apple and an orange, it's just different. It's a different meaning and a different feeling. To be under a bright sun, outside on a brightly sunlit day or indoors in an intensely neon lit space or fluorescent space. It's just a different kind of experience, and I think that those experiences are equally intense and valid, and specific and I love that specificity of one verses the other because it talks about condition, and it talks about stage and it talks about state of mind.

ML: Your abstract paintings have been likened to the scrambled reception of a TV, unrecognizable imagery yet somehow familiar with the images penetrating the viewer like a slogan. What led you to isolate and define this particular attribute in your paintings?

ODO: Well it's all about contrast for me, all about condition and contrast - what is the nature of the space, how can I bring the space to an alert consideration, to an alerted and alarm consideration, how might I deal with say the subtlety of say a whisper, how can one whisper and bring attention to what they need to say. How can one scream, shrill, and bring attention to what they say. So a lot of it is about being effective. Having a sense of effectiveness of force being able to modify, being able to render in colour, being able to hold in colour the nature of a given space. It's really that I think that there can be so much clarity and at the same time so much openness when one uses colour and there is so much possibility with it and I think, and I know for sure that colour as much as I have talked about it specifically doesn't exist by itself. It needs so much of everything else for it to be something at it's most intense.

ML: The installation in Cincinnati, Flow, you juxtaposed the confederate flag colours with white and black skin colours. Is this one of those invisible penetrations?

ODO: The penetration again is in the mind's eye. It's about trying to change the mind or affect the way that somebody can engage the space. I wanted to be able to come from my consideration of that space you are talking about the one in Cincinnati. To me, my consideration of the space, the nature of the space with Zaha Hadid's design in the space.







I am just trying to do many different things in this sense. I am just addressing some of the many layers, reality to colour. Good colour doesn't exist. Space doesn't exist without colour and drawing. You need line and form. Colour with edge to be able to help give one a definition of space, to give oneself a sense and a definition of space and I'm trying in my work to be able to understand all the different polarities that can possibly exist to get to this notion of space and in that sense having the body react to that space, react to that in new, different and varying ways. I am always interested in being able to come across some other situation or condition that I didn't foresee because then it talks to me about the infinite, about infinity; positivity and infinity of space and the world around us you know, and on many levels, from the level of music, to the level of intellectual inquiry, to the notion of reality I am trying to investigate what colour can be and it's not just wanting to use it to define form or wanting to use it to depict objects, but I want to use it also to help create an understanding of the world we live in and an engagement in that world too through a better understanding of colours, our sense of how we perceive colour. How we deal with it, how we handle it in our daily, our day-to-day experience and it's just so interesting how from one place to the other with travels, literal travel as well as Internet travel, how one can see and experience these changes. If you were travelling, you're going from one city to the next, if you are sensitive you are going to notice that light is different that daylight and the night-light is different and I think that's an important thing to realise. What you are saying is I am here. I am in this world and I see and I can see.

ML: You've described your wall paintings as events, ephemeral, for a definitive period, to be experienced in person and then gone. What does this ephemerality bring to the work?

ODO: As a student, I loved this artist On Kawara, a Japanese artist. He started out making postcards where he would say, he said I'm alive, I'm here and he would send them out to people, his friends and people he knew and later on he made these date paintings which were painted on the day, and the subject matter is the day that they're painted. September 12, 1967 ... February 18, 1966 ... December 30, 2004. They carry the meaning from just the day that they were made. It becomes just a really beautiful experience as I see it - just existing. They have a sense of permanence because that is real, and they are temporary because the day passes and another thing about them is that they were painted out of a suitcase essentially. This guy doesn't need a lab or studio with twenty assistants running around, it's just a modest scale painting with this date on it, written on it, and that is it and I've always liked that idea.

So for me, maybe I'm excited by this notion of the wall paintings because being essentially not literally but essentially something it's like this, I go to the hardware store, buy my paints, I have a pattern and everything, I go in there and paint on the wall, give something to the public, give something to them you know, they can take part in it, enjoy it, and then it comes down and the experience is heightened by the fact that somebody, that you the viewer where able to go see it you know.

ML: Mentioning Kawara he has been archiving the colours from his painting for many years which in turn became *an artwork unto itself. We heard that you too archive your colour palette. Your paintings sometimes use up to 100+ colours, it seems like the archiving process would be quite rigorous. What importance do you put on this process of documentation?

ODO: Well yes I've documented since the very largest painting I made in '98. I document the colours that I've used in my paintings maybe part of it is just the fact of my father being an art historian. It is partly in my mind to want to, to have the desire to document and to make documentation of my actions. It was something that I was taught from him but at the same instance it's about being able to see just the experiences that I've been able to have with colour. On another level it's being able to see how far I have gone with colour. I want to look to see if I am using the same kinds of colours, if I am using different ones, if I am reaching for different considerations or different positions or different spaces through colour. Colour creates space; colour is about space as much as it's about paint. So I want to know that I am being able to challenge myself, challenge my considerations of what it can be, useful, appropriate, what could work with colour.

* Journals 1966 - 2000, On Kawara. Shown in Colour Chart: Reinventing Colour 1950 to Today, MoMA New York 2008.

ML: In reflection where have you gone in your dialogue with colour for example in one instance?

ODO: For me right now, with the show that I have up*, I am very happy with the way that I have been able to create a dynamic that goes beyond just colour itself. The dynamic of the colour and the colour situation, and the composition of the colours created this light, created this type of energy in the space where light and colour and form came together in a way that blew the space apart, that really just pushed the space apart.

I was interested in the physicality of light and the physicality of light being generated through colour and the physicality of light as it moved through the room because it was generated by the colour in the room.

* *Body & Space* exhibited at Jack Shainman Gallery from November 18 to December 23, 2010 in New York

ML: It's interesting your articulation of this intangible phenomenon; I was able to experience this at the show.

ODO: Art in the academy and discourse of the academy, we are trained to find ways to speak of things that there are no words for but you know, it's the power of colour, it's phenomena is beyond words. It's about reality, it's about being able to experience physical nature, how it shapes how it defines, it identifies. It is very important to be able to for me, to be able to experience those things and that is rewarding. It reminds me that colour is not just only an item to fill identification of a space but it is used to really make the world new and again, make the world new and again.

ML: What role does the pursuit of innovation play in your practice; you've written that you hope to make a contribution to the intellectual future of painting? Where do you think you are?

ODO: Well, I am still in the process of it. I had this show that I had a really good experience with. I almost killed myself doing the show cause it was so much work and so much preparation in such a short time but you know I appreciate the process, I appreciate what I learned. There's an artists who once said, talked about coming out of your space, your studio to know what fear is and I think that strong work can be like this experience of coming to face one's fears and learning to live beyond them, yah.

This coming April, Odita will participate in a group exhibition at ARS 11, Kiasma, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki Finland where he will be exhibited a piece inspired by Africa.

About the artist

Odili Donal Odita was born in Enugu, Nigeria and lives and works in Philadelphia and New York. Odita is currently an Associate Professor of Painting at Tyler School of Art, Temple University in Philadelphia. His work has been exhibited around the globe in solo and group exhibitions. Of note, the 52nd Venice Biennale, The Contemporary Art Museum, Huston, The studio Museum in Harlem and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco.

Odita is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town.

<http://www.odilidonaldodita.com/>
<http://www.jackshainman.com/>
<http://www.michaelstevenson.com/>

Missla Libsekäl

Founder of online magazine Another Africa, a platform to showcase a contemporary vision of Africana. She works as a design business consultant earning her degree in Business Administration with Honours in Management though recently made a foray into the world of publishing and journalism. (www.anotherafrica.net) She is passionate about Africa and conveying stories that speak to the richness and cultural wealth from and inspired by this continent.

Ilpo Jauhiainen

He is a composer, sound artist and writer. Studied Sonic Arts at the Middlesex University, London, UK.

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Odili Donald Odita. *Body & Space* 2010. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.









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Acrylic on canvas 90 x 92 inches. Courtesy of the artist
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