

Spotlight: Tunji Adeniyi-Jones

Exhibition dates: January 13-February 4, 2023
545 West 25th Street, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10001

The FLAG Art Foundation's Spotlight exhibition series includes a new or never-before-exhibited artwork accompanied by a commissioned piece of writing. It is the hope of this series to create focused and thoughtful dialogues between the visual arts and critics, scholars, poets, etc. In its eighth iteration, the Spotlight features Tunji Adeniyi-Jones's painting *Cascading Violet II*, 2022, with a text by independent curator, writer, and researcher Dr. Jareh Das.

On Tunji Adeniyi-Jones's *Cascading Violet II*, 2022 By Jareh Das

"The bodies and forms depicted in these works can all be derived from the African continent, and more specifically rooted in a mythology emanating from the West African coast [...] The figures in my work are expressions of my identity and there is something very rewarding about using the body as a vehicle for storytelling." -Tunji Adeniyi-Jones

London-born, New York-based, British-Nigerian artist, Tunji Adeniyi-Jones probes the amalgamation of his lived experiences across cultures and geographies. Travel shapes how he perceives the world and how bodies both move and inhabit space. Adeniyi-Jones mines Anglo and African art histories to inform a unique approach to his figurative paintings and drawings. He explores a range of influences within these histories, including movements such as Pan-Africanism, Negritude, Nigerian modernism, and the Harlem Renaissance.¹ Adeniyi-Jones is widely known for distinctive, gender-ambiguous paintings of figures, or rather silhouettes to be precise, which look as though they are dancing or floating across time and space. But these paintings begin their life with a line. A line of a figure or figures that are worked and reworked again and again until the artist is satisfied with their features and poses.

Time-travelling bodies, one might argue, are captured, suspended mid-movement, by the artist. Adeniyi-Jones's figures are self-determined and refuse normative bodily categorizations—racialized or gendered—but are characterized instead by recognizable features, Black/African, individual yet nuanced that a singular interpretation of their origins elude. As art and design historian, Camille Okhio concurs, "at the core of the artist's process is an ongoing investment in self-realization [...] although not necessarily autobiographical, the beings that take form and flight in his substantial oil paintings all contribute to the investigation of individual identity."² Adeniyi-Jones has cited artists including Ben Enwonwu (1917-94), Henry Matisse (1869-1954), Aaron Douglas (1899-1979), and Clara Etso Ugbodaga-Ngu (1921-96) as influences, particularly attending to how silhouettes feature in these older artists' works and how his own interpretation of the form is constantly evolving. Enwonwu remains a recurring guide for Adeniyi-Jones, a master in his lifetime renowned for effortless, expressive, and fluid figures, whether they were drawn, painted, or cast in bronze. Yoruba mythology from Nigerian literature is another point of departure for the artist, notably, the writing of Amos Tutuola (1920-97) who gained international recognition for his first novel *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, published in 1952.³

¹ Harlem in the 1920s was a place for personal transformation. People were attracted there from all over the United States and brought expectations with them. The experience of living there opened them to new possibilities. People were stimulated by meeting many new strangers and by opportunities afforded by clubs, cabarets, concert halls, theatres, and other venues. An integral period of Black American life, and how it helped make, and converged with, modernism.

² Camille Okhio, 'Soaring Limbs, Bodily Limbs', *Tunji Adeniyi-Jones*, catalogue, The Charleston Trust, and White Cube, 2022, p.65

³ Tutuola's novel was the first African novel published in English outside of the continent. It is a phantasmic portrayal of the main protagonist's journey to the land of the dead and the many supernatural and terrifying beings he encounters and ultimately overcomes.

This mythological and rhythmic rendering is evident in earlier works, such as *Nightfall*, 2018, and *Dance in Heat II*, 2020, wherein figures dominate the pictorial frame. Bodies in motion dance, float, and are liberated within decadent, colourful backgrounds of recurring lush landscapes and contrasting colors indicative of the changing light (night/day) of the seasons. In his most recent paintings, *Cascading Violet*, and *Cascading Violet II*, both 2022 (the latter on view for the first time at FLAG), figures hold a pose and there is less obvious motion. "With this painting," Adeniyi-Jones explained over the phone, "I'm addressing how the figures move in space and it represents a transition from dancing figures in earlier work to ones that are sort of cascading in their poses. I am also filling the background with more colours in the composition than I usually would, which also represents a cascade of colours and provides more of an optical illusion in doing so."

The two violet, twinning figures that dominate *Cascading Violet II* are set against a lush background of blues, violets, and pinks. They mimic each other in their poses, right arms arched above their heads, left arms and legs pointed and kicked upwards. The figures are expressionless yet hold the gaze of the viewer. Fluid lines and sharp angles outline their poses, which remind me of the kinds found in voguing battles in New York ballrooms in the 1980s, the origins of which trace back to the Black and Latinx LGBTQ communities of Harlem. Furthermore, these figurative forms emerge from a floral background that frames them as curved lines of bodies and leaves corresponding. Adeniyi-Jones has not just created a background, but a painterly tapestry wherein bodies and landscape fuse to create an optical illusion that emulates and emphasises their poses. This effect commands our attention to follow the lines of the composition, and importantly, to look closer.

Visual representations of Blackness and Africanness are ever-changing, and rather than look to essentialized definitions of contemporary Black identity and its signifiers in the work of Adeniyi-Jones, attention should be paid to his attempt to deconstruct Black representation by using silhouettes for storytelling. Stories shift and change depending on who tells them, but they afford us endless possibilities to reimagine who we are and our place in the world.

About:

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones (b. 1992, London, United Kingdom) is an artist living and working in New York, NY. Adeniyi-Jones received a BFA from The Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom, in 2014, and an MFA from Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT, in 2017. Recent solo exhibitions include *Emergent Properties*, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York, NY (2022); *Voix Intérieures*, White Cube, Paris, France (2022); *That Which Binds Us*, White Cube Bermondsey, London, United Kingdom (2021); *Melodic Virtues*, Morán Morán, Los Angeles, CA (2021); among others. His work has been included in numerous group exhibitions, including *In Our Time: Selections from the Singer Collection*, Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, AZ (2022); *Out of the Fire: The 14th Dakar Biennale*, Senegal (2022); *Fire Figure Fantasy: Selections from the ICA Miami's Collection*, ICA Miami, FL (2022); *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, Birmingham Museum of Art, AL (2022); among others. Adeniyi-Jones's work is included in the permanent collections of the Aishti Foundation, Lebanon; the Dallas Museum of Art, TX; the Nasher Museum of Art, Durham, NC; Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, FL; The Studio Museum, Harlem, NY; among others.

Dr. Jareh Das is an independent curator, writer, researcher, and occasional Florist who lives and works between West Africa and the United Kingdom. Das's most recent curated exhibition, *Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics and Contemporary Art* surveyed how ceramics have been disrupted, questioned, and reimaged by Black women over the last seventy years beginning with seminal Nigerian potter, Ladi Kwali. In 2022, Das was awarded a two-year early career fellowship from Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art as part of their New Narratives Awards. Previous curatorial and editorial roles include Camden Art Centre (2021), MVRDV, Rotterdam (2016-2018), Arts Catalyst, London (2013-2016), Etamad Gallery, Dubai (2011-2012) and MIMA Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (2009-2011). She has also contributed to a wide range of international publications online and in print.