

# ABE ODEDINA: BIRDS OF PARADISE



**COPELAND GALLERY**  
**COPELAND PARK & BUSSEY BUILDING**  
133 Copeland Road, London SE15 3SN

**PRIVATE VIEW:** Thursday 25 April, 6pm-9pm  
Exhibition Open: 24 April – 1 May 2019, 11am-6pm

*Birds of Paradise* is the second comprehensive installation of a major series of paintings by Abe Odedina presented by Ed Cross Fine Art and curated by Katherine Finerty at Copeland Gallery.

Spectacular, iridescent plumage with elaborate, elongated tails – these striking features distinguish birds of paradise, and their eponymous blossoms. These creatures are all unique, express themselves fully, and are quite simply a celebration of just being alive. This new body of work by Abe Odedina is a salutation to all that birds of paradise represent: the importance of never forgetting that humanity is magnificent and enduring, no matter how shrivelled or shrunken we may feel personally and collectively. In a moment where notions of paradise might seem more tenuous and far away from reality than ever, these landscapes, portraits, and stories remind us to become reattached in the face of cacophony. They inspire us to fight back with a tender sense of respect, a curious penchant for listening, and an effortless sense of seduction – basically and blissfully: to live our best lives.

This exhibition takes us on a journey of diverse interpretations of paradise that prioritise humanity and the universal search for fulfilment. Paradise can mean a myriad of things to any given individual, yet we're all wired to think of it, crave it, need it. From surrealist landscapes to everyday domestic settings, Odedina's works make it clear that whilst paradise is far from perfection, it is filled with possibility and thus more than just a mirage of hope. In the eponymous work, Odedina offers a rare self-portrait depicting his decades-long endeavour of slowly and ceremoniously covering his body in tattoos by an emerging local apprentice. For the artist, tattoos represent a brilliant sense of physical plasticity and freedom of expression, once perceived as horribly shocking and now quite easily embraced – a form of paradise at once personal yet aesthetically and symbolically universal. In *Safety Net*, on the other hand, we're invited to explore how symbolic and wistful notions of paradise can affect our daily lives. Whether these forms are manifested through intimate moments of insecurity or more universal undertakings such as the migrant crisis; our human needs, questions, and dreams shape paradise more as a Promise Land than Neverland. Whether our conception of paradise reveals itself as an environment, state of mind, or fantasy, we're preoccupied with how we can best belong within these physical and ideological realms.

In order to explore this idea, Odedina has turned towards landscapes as a new mode of expression. They range from spectacular and seductive to eerie and surreal, following after a post-war British art tradition seeking how one can make sense of a space that feels decimated physically and socio-politically – a space where your values seem irrevocably displaced. Thus these interpretations of paradise are not just happy hills, but rather nuanced expressions of the shadows and darkness that inevitably accompany the light: the unsustainable realities often hiding behind our dream holidays. But rather than preach to its audiences or take a cynical turn, this body of work generously acknowledges that whilst all might not be well, a palpable solution is always looming, and it is very much in our hands: how can we be our best?

Odedina's paintings speak through a highly legible allegorical vernacular, warmly hailed as 'Brixton Baroque'. His work is bold and mythical whilst always accessible – their readability is paramount. Odedina describes himself as a folk artist and his practice is inspired by the rich figurative and oral traditions of African art, infused with a trace of magic realism. *'The struggle is to reconcile bold imagery with ideas about ambiguity or indeterminacy. My intention is to arouse the imagination and heart of the viewer and to detonate ideas in another realm.'* Furthermore, Odedina is influenced by a diverse range of creators – Voodoo practitioners from Haiti, the Painters of the Sacred Heart, anonymous African craftsman – championing those who choose to be makers. His practice seeks to revive and deconstruct quintessential classical themes spanning from ancient Greek to Yoruba mythologies to create a charged dialogue between epochs, cultures, and peoples. The stories breaking through the surface of his paintings surpass physical borders. They activate a uniquely contemporary conversation that oscillates between life and art, and in the folk tradition, life trumps art.

This exhibition follows Abe Odedina's first large-scale solo show *EYE TO EYE* (2016) also at Copeland Gallery, now a physical and spiritual home away from home for the many characters populating the artist's oeuvre. It is with this spirit of endurance and continuity that Odedina's new body of work builds upon his initial focus on empowering the spectator, whilst now further conjuring ideas of belief, ritual, and equality to form simultaneously spiritual and sustainable representations of humanity. Here, the future is portrayed as a possibility where religion meets science, where the past meets the present, and where we are not afraid to find our inner birds of paradise. The artist states: *'What I'm always excited about is bringing big, bold paintings into the world that seem to be clear on what they don't know... We're going to have to find ways of understanding how we're here: it's going to include factual stuff, and it's going to include magical stuff, and we're going to find the right blend if we want to have a meaningful life.'*

- Text by Katherine Finerty



**Abe Odedina** (b. 1960, Ibadan, Nigeria, lives in London and Salvador Bahia) is a trained architect who started painting on a trip to Brazil in 2007. Now a full-time painter, Odedina works with acrylic on plywood, making flat surfaces with vibrant, stylised subjects that delight in the use of colour and celebrate the power of both the everyday and the mythical. Solo exhibitions: *True Love*, The Department Store Brixton (2018); *Body Language*, 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, Somerset House (2017); *EYE TO EYE*, Copeland Gallery (2016), *HI-LIFE*, Brixton East (2014); and *Under the Influence*, Aldeburgh Beach Lookout (2013). Group exhibitions: *Talisman in the Age of Difference*, Stephen Friedman (2018); *Summer Exhibition*, Royal Academy (2017), *Brixton Design Trail*, Street Gallery (2015); *Global Artists Consortium*, Knight Webb Gallery (2013); and *BP Portrait Award*, National Portrait Gallery (2013), for which Odedina was nominated for his diptych *The Adoration of Frida*. The artist, together with The Underground Museum, Los Angeles, was awarded the 2017 *Ellsworth Kelly Award* from the Foundation of Contemporary Arts, New York. His works are in major collections internationally, including The British Government Art Collection. Portrait by Claudia Leisinger

**Ed Cross Fine Art** is based in London and was established in 2009, although Cross has been a 'pioneer' in the field of Contemporary African Art since 2006. The gallery works with leading emerging curators and represents international artists, in particular those of African descent, whose practices engage in significant global conversations today.

**Katherine Finerty** (b. New York City, lives and works in London) is an independent curator focusing on socially engaged practices, translocal identity politics, and contemporary African art. She holds an MA in Curating from the Royal College of Art and studied History of Art at Cornell and Cambridge Universities.

**edcrossfineart**

ed@edcrossfineart.com

+44 (0) 7507067567

edcrossfineart.com

