



Abe Odedina

I'm a Believer

Abe Odedina: *I'm a Believer*

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Ed Cross, 19 Garrett Street, London, EC1Y 0TY

Abe Odedina's new solo show *I'm a Believer* crystallises something that has infused his practice since its earliest days. Via his irrepressible interest in stories and the way they help us make sense of the world, Odedina unites societal myths and daily minutiae under one thesis: fact and fiction aren't as different as we might think, and all it takes to transform one into the other is belief.

As a statement, the show's title operates a double bind – after all, declaring belief in something acknowledges its arbitrary limits; it allows for the possibility of *disbelieving*, framing belief as a choice rather than something inevitable. It's a worldview that offers enormous manoeuvrability, positioning grand narratives and hearsay alike in one arena, to subscribe to or discard as the case may be. Most importantly of all, it figures Odedina in a rich context – artist as creator of stories, not just an absorber of them.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Odedina revels in both roles. Replete with mini-miracles as well as bona fide supernatural occurrences, his tableaus testify to the magic of lives large and small alike. Rendered in his characteristic style, always privileging symbolic legibility, his paintings wrangle high and low into a single plane (plywood, acrylic), underplaying gods or overstating anecdotes depending on which angle you're looking from.

That pleasurable tension is evident in Odedina's playful titles –

Fig. 02 *The girl next door*, for instance, takes the point of view of a little boy. Standing next to a bike in his garden, he looks over his fence at the titular girl springing past on a cheetah, bridled and saddled as it lopes

across the dreamy landscape. Of course, the proposition is magical – a child riding a beast! – but also totally familiar, almost (paradoxically) tedious; echoes of keeping up with the Joneses, or the every-child refrain of *it's not fair, why can't I have one too?* ring out as the boy looks on.

Among Odedina's audience, almost everyone will recognise his 'girl next door' – that is, a baffling, enviable peer – as a figure from their own life. While it's a fair assumption that none of those figures will have regularly travelled by cheetah, the feeling invoked by the painting – of looking and longing, physical proximity versus the distance of desire – is totally accessible. Such is the sleight of hand at the core of many of Odedina's most affecting works: whichever character she identifies with, the viewer finds herself projected to the heart of an objectively magical scenario with unthinking familiarity.

Fig. 03

The sense of something uncanny – that is, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time – runs through Odedina's practice like a river. But while the uncanny generally brings with it some inference of unsettledness or dread, Odedina's strain is altogether more playful – off-kilter, sure, but on track in an intuitive way. In *Soft power*, a man with a cheetah's head and skin clutches a white rabbit to his torso. Against his white shirt and trousers, as well as a white curtain behind, the rabbit inhabits a tonally coherent scene even if its symbolic meaning is unclear. Is this a man or an animal? Is the rabbit a trick, a pet, or a meal? Have I seen this circus performer before?

Odedina is as enthusiastic as any viewer in his pursuit of answers to such questions; his reluctance to dispense definitive lore for the worlds he creates does not come from a desire to mystify, rather a preference for expansiveness over linearity. Like the stories that inspire his practice, Odedina's paintings are tools of translation – feelings into images and back again – but they are also objects in their own right, descriptive of their own logic and universe. As narrative as they are visual, Odedina's paintings are made to be read; like any good book, they combine clarity with ambiguity. Crucially, they must 'work' on their own terms, that is, without any need for exposition.

Drawing on religious traditions as well as pop culture – like The Monkees' 1966 song that shares the show's name – *I'm a Believer* locates the spark that powers existing narratives while also foregrounding the role of belief in contemporary art as a whole. Stepping into a gallery or a temple involves the belief that the objects inside will convey something

transcendent, change us in some way; having located that symbolic overlap, Odedina revels in it. *How about these objects, these images?* he seems to say. *I'm a believer* – and in walking through the gallery doors, so are you.

I'm a Believer

Essay by Katherine Finerty

In this short story on faith, we may believe, or trust, or find confidence, in what is possible. This conviction by artist Abe Odedina is an invitation.

We all have the power to believe in so many things, and when reality meets whimsy, our perceptions are founded in perpetuity. In this endless cycle, what we can imagine and create is not only believable, but real. In the world of Odedina's paintings, we are welcomed to peer into and step through a window where we can find faith in everything we can, and can't, see. A world where we can believe in...

Humanity

Hybridity, with ever-changing identities

Mythologies

Small girls who ride big cats

Golden boys

Enchantment

Music (for aren't we powerless in the face of music?)

Magic

Miracles

Miracles that will never end

Disasters

Disasters that come soon after Miracles

Patterns

Stories

Universality

Stories

Possibility

Stories.

We're not only welcome to, but intrinsically a part of, a world where we don't have to believe in binaries. We don't have to invest in finalities. We can reject impossibilities.

In this new body of work, Odedina gathers together references from religious traditions and natural phenomena to contemporary politics and pop culture, like the eponymous 1966 song by The Monkees. He employs paintings on board rather than canvas as tools of enchantment, whereby we may view ordinary lives through a magical lens, and anyone can be extraordinary. His renderings are diagrammatic at their core, capturing deeply felt ideas rather than representational anatomies. For at the end of the day, or an ether, what is still or solid? Emotions permeate as emblems.

An enduring influence in Odedina's oeuvre is the ever-present foundation of iconography as a visual tool to ideologically reveal syntheses. This practice explores the physical presence of a painted being as not just technical and art historical, but conceptual and emotional. His figures know they are painted, crafted, and thus able to communicate infinite layers of legibility. Recurring motifs comprise a visual vernacular in which patterns reveal possibilities: camouflage, cheetahs, doves, geometric shapes, blue skies, and an omnipresent trace of gold. A gold that lights up suns, gives edges to knives, highlights secrets, and holds a glow reflecting on galvanised faces. If we come close, these golden embers gift ignition to our own visages and minds.

These familiar iconographic friends find good company with iconic shapes, from checkerboard games of life to platonic solids, conjuring geometry as a field in alignment with truths, only as undeniable as our endless capacity to discover more, and more. We readily find a positioning of strong female figures dealing with these elemental forces in *Grace under fire* and *Pombagira, Queen of Queens*, whereby spatial relations give a deeper meaning to physical and psychological dimensionality. In these works, we perceive an insight into Odedina's painterly technique, in which he composes layers and levels as he would with a building. Harking back to his training and practice as an architect, Odedina brings his paintings to life with these surfaces – like a collage, or a human, he dresses them. Each patina holds layers and layers of decisions, leftovers dealing with time and an acknowledgment of never being finished. As the novelist Zadie Smith writes stories page by page, the artist crafts worlds coat by coat, suggesting movement through paint. A burst of fire, a circle of knives,

Fig. 05
Fig. 16

those platonic solids – they emerge into our own existence.

In Odedina's practice, composition is key. Each painting is a window into a new world, where we are at once as inside as we are outside, on the brink yet within a portal. Landscape plays a salient role in this commitment to belief, in which liminality is a physical delineation of space and newfound ground. Figures are established in settings full of encounters and possibilities. By facing this window, we immediately glean a dichotomy, finding ourselves in an ecosystem with both an internal and external sphere, on earth and beyond. We may bask in being allies of the natural world, where the wild and the tame exist all in one plane – glimpses into the Promised Land emerging from our own backyard. Here, in the epic landscape painting *A large inheritance*, we find a young, strong girl: the natural heroic figure for a Father of Daughters who has been surrounded by powerful women his whole life. It begs the question: what has she been left – what will she inherit: the Bull? The Sun? The World...? Maybe a whole, big, powerful world, as dangerous as it is exciting, or exciting because it is dangerous. The incongruous dynamic between these two majestic figures, the Girl and the Bull, suddenly feels very possible. For with this very capable girl, we have a hunch that she will get that red ball. As the symbols generously suggest, she has the measure of things.

Fig. 06

Fig. 02

In the spirit of Odedina's recurring motif of *The girl next door*, we find another young woman riding a big, dangerous cat. A cheetah – the fastest land animal on earth. This hierarchical shifting realises a sense of harnessing the future, a moment full of agency. 'The casually fantastic interests me,' the artist reflects. 'Whoever is going to be extraordinary, at some point they are just going to be next door. The people you see casually, just walking along, are all probably quite extraordinary in many ways.' And as active viewers, we the audience can identify with the innocent young boy behind the fence: he is the beneficiary of our shared imagination. Bike parked, hands clasped, he has a front row seat to a very powerful, agile role model. This girl next door is absolutely sorted.

Windows continue to delineate time and space in Odedina's painted world, placed not only as an invitation to cross boundaries, but also as a way of looking inward in order to see outward, to perceive gravity and our capacity to rise. This interrogation of our earthly realm exists in a fascinating push and pull with a more metaphysical prospect altogether: a world of gods, very much living amongst, with, and for us.

Fig. 04

The artist has been known to express that he's 'never met a god he didn't like', and with the Orisha spirits of West Africa's Yoruba religion, we can meet hundreds of them. These gods create a portal between the supreme creator and humans, teaching us how to exist and maintaining a life-force that makes things happen. In *Above the parapet*, we find a hybrid conjuring of Eshu, the dynamic messenger god, Shango known for his powerful double axe, and Oya, god of winds and lightning. These deities exist within an idea of mutual creation in Odedina's world – we are implicated in creating them, moving along together, existing in their image, and vice versa. We all work together, in the spirit of possession, to ultimately achieve a balance enabling many things to exist at once, in a constant oscillation. A balloon, as easily inflated as deflated, symbolises our expression and ideas. This painting asks how we may separate ourselves from our ideas, how we may broadcast them. There is always an orifice, a source to ignite, but also a tool to deflate. There is always choice. Agency.

Fig. 12

Furthering this technical interest in the architecture of how we behave when we summon the energy of a deity, Odedina turns towards everyday objects and contemporary ideas to frame how extraordinary we can be. We find the beloved, benevolent trickster god Eshu summoned again in *Modus operandi* as a dapper figure whose head is substituted for a kitchen mixer. His M.O. is all about the mixing of ideas, digesting, consuming – processing, everything. This churning leads to changeability. Transformation becomes transcendence. It's Eshu's reminder to be versatile, and find power in the ordinary. This sense of soft power and everyday activism permeates multiple portraits:

Fig. 10

Fig. 15

a *Golden Boy* radiating positivity; *Mami Wata* gingerly wearing a snake necklace; a concupiscent conjuring of Shango in camouflage; an elegant leopard holding a rabbit – all examples of tenderness in the face of chaos.

Fig. 08

And above them all is *Up the ante*, featuring an elevated, passionate young woman standing on her soapbox of Joy, in reference to the popular detergent of 1970s Nigeria. This nostalgic summoning ties in more recent histories, including the 2018-2019 End SARS social movement against police brutality. Standing assuredly, our protagonist finds her ultimate tool of broadcasting in an accordion – the hybrid instrument that communicates like an orchestra in a box, suggestive of migration and movement. Here Odedina fondly references the Zydeco music genre (harking back to southwest Louisiana in the early 20th century, incorporating elements of blues,

R&B, rock and roll, soul, and early Creole music, French, African American, and Afro-Caribbean styles) as a syncopated portal full of egalitarian virtuosity to emit a plethora of stories. He renders the accordion in a moment of expansion, like the lungs of a human, full of emotion and projection. For we are powerless in the face of music. With a golden starburst behind her Mickey Mouse buns, our guide emits endless ideas, protests, and dreams. It is with this gesture of great generosity that Odedina believes in, and creates, images whereby our self-definition is never fixed.

‘There is no one message,’ the artist reflects. ‘I’m not telling anyone what to do. There are no right or wrong stories. We just need other messages. We just need more. We need different. We can show how broad it all is. I’m just suggesting that it is a rich, complicated world in which extraordinary things happen, as well as terrible things – often on the same day, often side by side.’ In this rich, complicated world, miracles will never end, and disasters come soon after: the cycles of life and death present a balance as well as infinite variation. Here we find the dove – potent symbol of peace, love, and renewal – alive in *Special envoy* (a messenger, an agent) and then dead in *The taxidermist* (a carcass, a question). His head held in hand, evoking a power where futility meets optimism, it invites us to toe the line on the cusp of life and death and consider: what happens when the symbol of creation is destroyed? As ever, the spirits are here to help us, this time in the form of a smiling *Baron Samedi*, offering a violin for our sorrows, levity in the face of darkness, shining light on a natural, endless cycle.

Fig. 18
Fig. 13

Fig. 11

This infinity feeds off our believing. A nexus is fueled by it. This space defies gravity, or rather, it sets it free. Like the universal allegory of the ladder, an enduring symbol in Odedina’s visual vernacular, we know what it offers us, on and off earth. The *Ladder of dreams* is thus provided to all of these figures – and to all of us – as a tool of mobility and transportation, of enchantment and belief. ‘The ladders all offer the same possibilities,’ Odedina attests. ‘A change of perspective. Access. That’s why I like ladders: we will all find at some point there’s a ladder around... In the garden, or in the attic, or to the attic.’ And whether we find ourselves in the attic, or in the heavens, we are invited to transcend. We are inviting to progress, to hold gently, to relish in vacillation – to believe. For with belief, there is always room for manipulation, transmutation, possibility, and hope. Always hope.

Fig. 09



Fig.01: *In the mood for love*, 2023
164.5 × 122 cm



Fig.02: *The girl next door*, 2023
122 × 164.5 cm



Fig.03: *Soft power*, 2023
80 × 73 cm



Fig.04: *Above the parapet*, 2020 – 23
182.5 × 60 cm



Fig.05: *Grace under fire*, 2023
122 × 80 cm



Fig.06: *A large inheritance*, 2023
122 × 164.5 cm



Fig.07: *Push me I push you*, 2023
122 × 105.5 cm



Fig.08: *Up the ante*, 2021-23
208 x 122 cm



Fig.09: *Ladder of dreams*, 2023
244 × 41 cm



Fig.10: *Golden Boy*, 2023
47 x 40 cm



Fig.11: *Baron Samedi*, 2022-23
70 × 70 cm



Fig.12: *Modus operandi*, 2023
80 x 48.5 cm



Fig.13: *The taxidermist*, 2023
80 × 71 cm



Fig.14: *Laroye Portable Shrine*, 2023
Each panel: 24 × 27 × 5 cm







Fig.14: *Laroye Portable Shrine (reverse)*, 2023
Each panel: 24 × 27 × 5 cm



Fig.15: *At home with Mami Wata*, 2023
60 × 59 cm



Fig.16: *Pombagira, Queen of Queens*, 2023
122 × 122 cm

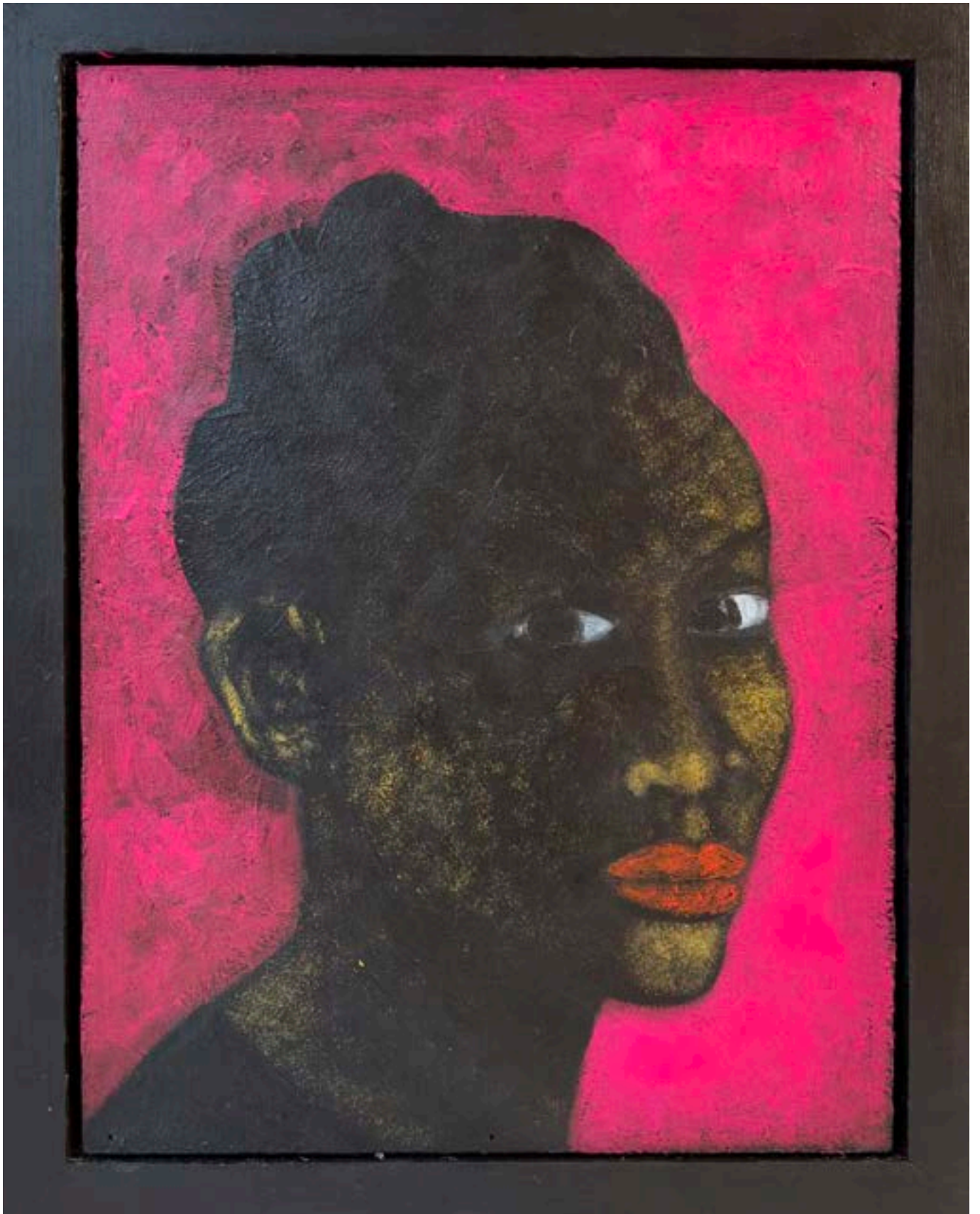


Fig.17: *Little Black Dress*, 2023
46.5 x 37 cm

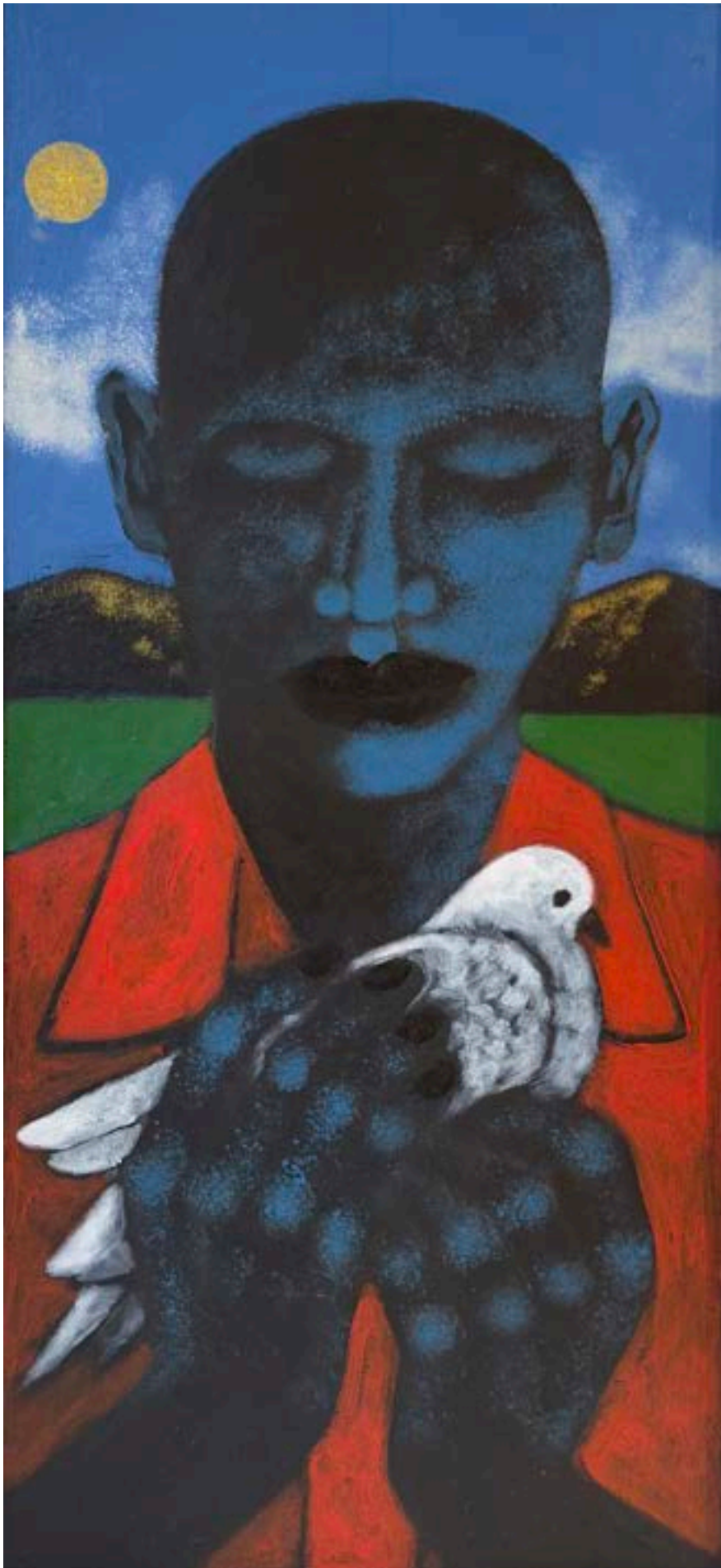


Fig.18: *Special envoy*, 2023
69 × 32.5 cm

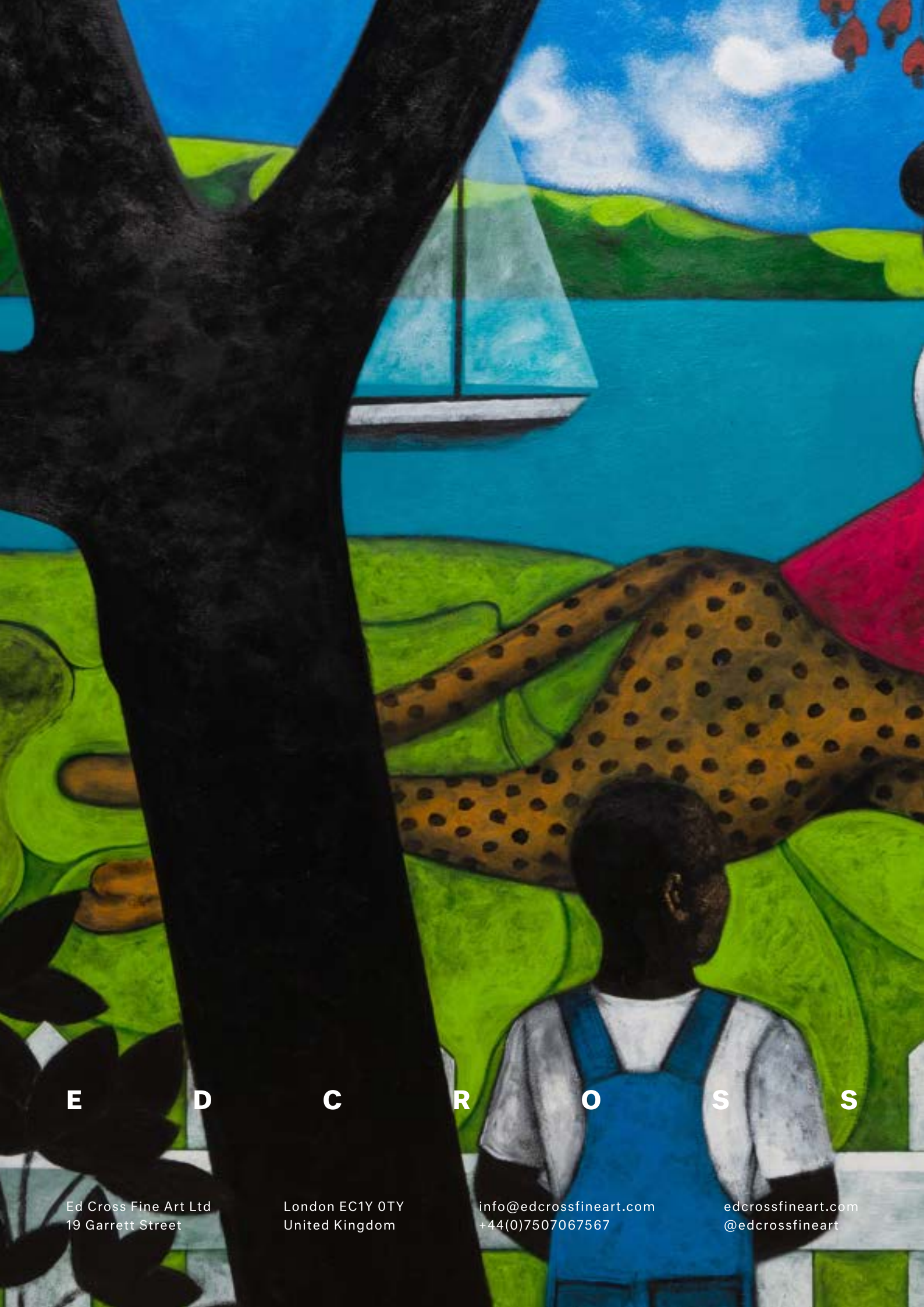
Born 1960, Ibadan (Nigeria), now living in London (UK) and Salvador Bahia (Brazil), Abe Odedina had a successful architecture career before starting to paint on a trip to Brazil in 2007. Working on board rather than canvas, Odedina's tableaus embody all the solidity – and practicality – of shop fronts or municipal murals. Compositional elements of Renaissance portraiture, devotional painting and even pop art frame figures from diverse mythologies (Yoruba, Haitian, Ancient Greek) as well as passers-by or characters plucked from the artist's own imagination. 'If, like me, you don't have the discipline or the interest in holding these clear categories,' says Odedina, 'then maybe it's better to enjoy that morphing, from hard facts to poetry, from something to nothing.'

Recent exhibitions include Independent Art Fair, New York (2023); *You Give Me Fever*, Diane Rosenstein, Los Angeles (2022); *When We See Us: A Century of Black Figuration in Painting*, Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town (2022); *Cutting Edge*, Ed Cross at Clerkenwell Gallery, London (2021); *In the Beginning* (online), Ed Cross (2021); *Just Looking*, ArtX, Lagos (2020); *Birds of Paradise*, Ed Cross at Copeland Gallery, London (2019); *Diaspora*, New Ashgate Gallery, Farnham (2019); *Get Up, Stand Up Now*, Somerset House, London (2019); *True Love*, Ed Cross at The Department Store, London (2018) and *Talisman in the Age of Difference*, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London (2018).

All works are acrylic paint on plywood.

Katherine Finerty (born in New York City, lives and works in London) is a curator, writer, and educator focusing on research-based and socially-engaged practices, translocal identity politics, and global contemporary art. Her collaborative practice develops alternative cultural discourses and multi-disciplinary art experiences that facilitate immersive participation and a sense of wonder. Finerty works as a Guest Curator for galleries and organisations in London, West Africa, and beyond in addition to exhibition research and art education development in the UK, USA, Sweden, and South Africa. Most recently, she was Strategic Partnerships Consultant at Pace Gallery (2023) and Curator-at-Large at The Showroom, London (2019-2022). Earlier museum experience includes The Studio Museum in Harlem, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Guggenheim Museum, New York. Finerty has a Masters in Curating Contemporary Art (Royal College of Art, London), BA in History of Art & Africana Studies (Cornell University, New York), and studied History of Art at the University of Cambridge. She is a member of the African Leadership Academy Creative Arts Advisory Board, and Trustee of Accumulate: The Art School for The Homeless.

Ed Cross works with emerging and established artists across and beyond the African diaspora. The gallery seeks to stage conversations – between practitioners, international audiences and as guided by its artists – to amplify voices historically silenced, and to create space for their independent development. Since launching in 2009, Ed Cross has held exhibitions across the world: from New York to Paris, and London to Lagos, the gallery continues to build on its values of cooperation and curiosity in its permanent space at 19 Garrett Street, London.



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