

books



ABE ODEDINA: LOVE AND HATE (ed Emily Watkins; Ed Cross, rrp £30) In 1960, the year of Nigerian independence, the artist Uche Okeke wrote a manifesto: ‘Young artists in a new nation, this is what we are! We must grow with the new Nigeria and work to satisfy her traditional love for art or perish with our colonial past.’ In response, his audience rose to the challenge, studying the country’s folklore and songs and experimenting with traditional art techniques to forge a new path. Meanwhile, the nation’s rampant development was sweeping away indigenous history. It was into this febrile cultural atmosphere that the artist Abe Odedina was born in the city of Ibadan. Recalling his early years to editor Emily Watkins, the artist explains that this cultural disparity – between modernisation and the folklore of his native Yoruba culture – has been a part of his work ever since.

Having arrived to study at Hull School of Architecture in the 1980s, Odedina began painting in 2007 after a trip to Brazil, when he discovered that the Yoruba religion’s deities had survived the trauma of the slave trade to prosper in South America. Within a decade, he’d been picked for the BP Portrait Award and included in Yinka Shonibare’s selection for the RA’s Summer Exhibition. In 2019, he held solo shows in Lagos and London, and today divides his time between Brixton and Brazil.

Abe Odedina: Love and Hate focuses on paintings made from 2013 to 2020, mostly allegorical works filled with coded messages, some more easily read than others. Odedina’s paintings are like children’s stories with adult themes, disarmingly tender and merciless. There is a little girl with a pet panther on a leash, a woman seated with a chainsaw just in reach, and a man in a white suit being devoured by a crocodile. Contemporary objects such as mobile phones and lipsticks are incorporated into paintings of serpents, severed fingers and dismembered hearts.

In her essay, writer Adjoa Armah explores a recurring theme in Odedina’s work, that of the magician or trickster, a character found in Greek mythology and Haitian Vodou. These illusionists can shapeshift and travel anywhere, perhaps reflecting Odedina’s own fluid approach to culture.

The illusionist is also a good foil for Odedina’s brand of magical realism, one in which people sprout wings and become angels, morph into beasts and experience ecstatic sexual encounters. Yet his search for the miraculous is firmly rooted in the everyday. Ed Cross, Odedina’s gallerist, describes the artist’s paintings as ‘beautiful instruments of agency and liberation’. Ultimately, Odedina’s work is a testament to a culture that crossed the sea in chains and returned in wondrously creative ways ■ JESSICA LACK is the author of *Global Art* (Thames & Hudson)

To order *Abe Odedina* for the price above (plus £4.50 UK p&p), ring the publisher on 07507 067567, or visit edcrossfineart.com