



“Chris Ofili: *Night and Day*,” installation view. Photo: Maris Hutchinson/EPW. © Chris Ofili. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London.

CHRIS OFILI: NIGHT AND DAY,

New Museum – New York

Curated by Massimiliano Gioni, Gary Carrion-Murayari and Margot Norton

By Keren Moscovitch

“Chris Ofili: Night and Day” at the New Museum is more than a thematically provocative and visually arresting exhibition about culture, sexuality and religion. It functions as a concerto, a polyphonic score of cultural landscapes and diverse voices, all emanating from an artist whose transnational identity is at the core of his practice. Raised in the UK by Nigerian parents, Ofili gained American recognition in 1999 when his piece *Holy Virgin Mary* appeared at the Brooklyn Museum as part of the infamous “Sensation” show and became the scapegoat of Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s funding war. Strongly committed to narrative—both personal and collective—Ofili returns to US soil with an artfully curated mid-career retrospective that sets his work apart from the ironic abstraction that floods today’s market and the cool detachment of the British tradition out of which he emerged.

Ofili is an agile image-maker boldly choosing materials for their physical and sensual qualities and pulling from such diverse sources as ballet, hip hop, literature and cinema, as well as characters he encountered on the streets of London. Visitors are introduced to his intimate approach to figuration by an extensive set of drawings, the *Afro-Muses*. Spanning ten years, they peel the curtain back on the artist’s daily drawing practice of working with the human visage. Displayed like a mosaic, heads and necks are adorned with liquid watercolor regalia, showcasing Ofili’s interest in mixing European portrait painting traditions with African tribal imagery. In the next gallery, the symbolic trope of dried elephant dung is used, a material that Ofili became intrigued with during his time in Zimbabwe. The dung disrupts any possibility of a pristine surface, entering the viewer’s space authoritatively at some moments and delicately at others, producing a contrapuntal rhythmic beat that moves visitors through space. A testament to the artist’s socio-political engagement, another portrait from this series, *No Woman No Cry* is an ode to the mother of a black youth murdered in a brutal hate crime in Britain, and is poignantly relevant in our post-Ferguson era.

A highpoint of the exhibition is the “Blue Rider” series, a series of powerful paintings in dark hues of black and blue. Mythic figures slowly emerge from the dim abyss of the gallery—an architectural environment designed and lit by the artist for proper viewing of these works. As eyes adjust to the dark in the meditative space, eerie beings cloaked in mysterious energies traverse a conflicted landscape of romance and trauma.

Ofili’s crescendo reaches climax in the “Metamorphoses” series, based on Ovid’s tales of transfiguration, heroism and love, for which the artist designed a fantastic environment that evokes stained glass cathedrals and enchanted forests. *Ovid-Actaeon* is an arresting composition of hermaphroditic figures intertwined in what could be a dance, fight, or orgy. Based on the ancient story of a hunter getting mauled to death by his own dogs as punishment for defiling a sacred goddess with his gaze, this painting addresses narratives of prosecution, persecution and the sexual frustration that periodically surfaces in Ofili’s work. The artist’s increasingly poetic language of color, movement and form rises to a pitch-perfect peak, condensing myriad themes into acts of transformation and spiritual questioning.

The construction of immersive environments unifies the concept of each gallery, while bombarding the senses in a manner that encourages an open-ended reading of a complex body of work. The dance between sacred and profane, totem and taboo, hopeful and sinister, transforms this exhibition into a journey through worlds. Reverence is just as much a part of Ofili’s process as iconoclasm. An undercurrent of melancholy and disquiet runs through “Night and Day,” producing a kaleidoscopic vision of personal and communal mythmaking. Carefully tuning in to the soundtrack of his epoch, Ofili mixes new tunes to an ancient beat. ■

(October 29, 2014 - January 25, 2015)