

FACE - ME - I - FACE - YOU



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DAVID OTARU

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Face-Me-I-Face-You

Rele Gallery, Lagos is pleased to present Face-Me-I-Face-You, the second solo exhibition and first in Lagos of Lagos-based artist David Otaru. The exhibition draws from the artist's personal experiences growing up in a 'Face Me, I Face You' apartment — a residential building arrangement common in low-income areas in Nigeria, where a group of one or two-room apartments have their entrances facing each other along a walkway. Here, Otaru references familiar settings and objects in reconstructing distinct memories. For the artist, these moments form a point of inquiry into a distant, yet pivotal period, one marked by hardship and financial crisis. Ideas of childhood and the familial take center stage, offering access to emotive, interior lives. In Face-Me-I-Face-You, nostalgia becomes a tool for joint remembering, a 'simple' exploration of being and mutual existence.

Done primarily in acrylic, the paintings employ realistic figuration in creating carefully composed scenes of play, intimacy and the mundane. The exhibition presents us with domestic scenes of daily life, these undefinable 'minor' moments that offer a glimpse into familiar lives. Scenes of reflection and recollection — a couple dancing, cosplay, a game of checkers — takes the viewer on a trip through nostalgia into spaces long forgotten. This deliberately direct representation of life — as played out in the home — positions the 'instant' as a trigger for conversations surrounding family histories, class struggles and the banal, yet defining qualities of the everyday.

Otaru's paintings, populated with transistor radios, old TV sets and family photographs, situate his characters and environments in a specific time, examining the full presence of being from the singularity of a moment. These moments, often existing beyond the reach of language, consider the commonplace as a communal experience as well as a site for the reading and creation of complex lives. With this exhibition, Otaru maps out areas of memory embedded in spaces and objects. Household items, interior spaces and bodies become vehicles for excavating parts of an event.



Draught , Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 66in, 2022



Alone time, Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 66in, 2022



Daddy will handle it, Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 66in, 2021



Daydreaming (I), Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 66in, 2022



Daydreaming (II), Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 66in, 2022



Let's be superheroes, Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 66in, 2022



Party dolls, Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 66in, 2022



Just one game, Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 66in, 2022

Face-Me-I-Face-You

adeoluwa oluwajoba in conversation with David Otaru

ao: First off, congratulations on your second solo exhibition, how do you feel?

DO: I'd say I feel fulfilled because I've been wanting to get to a level with my work where it's not just about the exhibition, but about the growth. This entire process has pushed me to achieve and I am happy with the growth so far. As an artist, when you make something and it comes out the way you want it, you feel more connected with the piece. This process has been me narrating my experience of childhood and I am happy with the way it's being put out there.

ao: Speaking of growth, you moved from being a YC participant in 2020 to have your first solo in LA, and now you are having your second. What has the journey been like both in terms of the stylistic approach and your thinking about art?

DO: The journey has been great. I like that I got exposed to a lot of things, narrative and creative-wise. I had always felt restricted coming from a background in hyperrealism. The work I did then would come out great but I wasn't really satisfied and thought there could be more to my practice. I used to think the more realistic the works were, the more I would get from them. Then I switched up my style a little bit and realised I enjoyed an easier approach. The narrative became simple, and it felt like my ideas were represented better. I like improving and while I may not know what the next

stage of evolution will look like, I just want to keep getting better as long as it gives me satisfaction and I am confident in the work.

I have met people with more knowledge and gotten a few lessons along the way, especially on how to improve my practice and become a better artist. Working with Rele has been the best decision I have made so far and it has helped me realise the kind of artist I am. I have been really impressed and grateful for the entire experience.

ao: Could you tell me a bit about the exhibition and the presented works?

DO: I draw a lot from conversations with people and creating something out of the stories. I haven't been making art for long, but this has been the most fun project for me. Getting to talk to people, hear their experiences and bring a little bit of nostalgia into the whole project. I don't really like using 'big' words for something that I feel is so simple. For this exhibition, I draw from my childhood experience living in a 'Face Me, I Face You' apartment as we call it in Nigeria. My father wasn't in the country and so many things went south that we had to move. Coming from a place where we were living fairly well to a place where it was much harder, I think part of me shut down at the fact we were suffering. However, after a while, I started seeing life differently and realising you could still have fun despite not having enough. Even more fun than middle or upper-class people. It was really beautiful and I felt the happiness of the people I lived with rubbing off on me. So as a kid, I didn't really see the 'suffering' or 'hardship', I saw life. From a very young age, I started to understand that it is not so much about what you have but how you live. Instead of putting tags on it or trying to answer; 'what is your life like?' I just live. I am not interested in putting any captions on it because life can be whatever you describe it.

With this exhibition, I'm bringing both personal experiences as well as stories of growing up from different people. Stories like going out to our neighbour's place to play video games or times when there was no light and we would dress up as superheroes.

There were so many stories to draw from because we were all just living our lives and having fun. Growing up in that environment was when I also saw parents be affectionate with each other. There is a painting called Alone time where you see a man and his wife dancing. It was funny seeing that because such softness wasn't shown in front of the kids, but no matter how bad the situation was they still had time for each other.

ao: In looking at your work you depict a lot of characters going about their everyday life. From scenes of play to intimacy as you mentioned earlier. It's very interesting hearing you talk about all the different stories that you were exploring and I was wondering how you select your characters in terms of the figures and the poses that they assume in your works. What informs your compositions and how do you select your models?

DO: This whole series was inspired by an old photo album from home. While I wasn't precisely copying images from it, seeing some pictures reminded me of events that happened around the time the photograph was taken. When I decide on a particular story or moment to explore, I figure out the title first and start the composition, figuring out what each component looks like. I want my compositions to be easy to understand so people don't need to ask me what is going on. I think of how I want a character to pose and the process usually feels like directing a play in my head. While the composition explains it so I don't need to, I try not to make it too literal by also exploring metaphors in my work.

It's easier for me to paint my stories from how I remember them and most of these stories are from when I was a kid. The process of composition is actually the best part of my work because it brings everything together and you feel the emotions I want you to feel. The composition helps to define the mood. Was it cold or warm? Violent or peaceful? With this process, I am putting parts together like making a movie and I try to be as accurate as possible and not just put pieces together because I want to make a painting. Sometimes I use a few characters for a story and other times I use

a lot of characters, but ultimately the point is the story. I also focus on the space and environment in my work. There might be a lot of characters, but I want to ensure that there is a lot of space for the viewer to ‘move’ around the work.

ao: I think it is very interesting thinking about your practice and the process of making this series as a collection of experiences. You are reaching into the past and trying to draw out as much as possible in creating these intimate scenes. Having followed your work for a while, nostalgia has always been something you’ve explored and it forms a vital part of your work. What role does it play in your practice, especially in the context of this exhibition?

DO: Nostalgia brings a sort of memory for me, it’s a way to remember how happy and simple life was. Shout out to technology, it is beautiful, but there are some things that are so retro, when we see them they bring back certain memories, either good or bad. As we advance in life, grow and the world changes, we forget about a lot of things. How did material objects affect us back then? For example, there is this old rechargeable lantern that has a cassette player. Whenever I see it, I remember a moment in my life when I wanted to be an on-air-personality and would listen to the radio or times after school when my friends and I would watch cartoons and VHS movies on an old box TV. Seeing objects like that always bring back memories and that’s what I want to evoke in the viewer. Before they think about the narrative, they recognize familiar elements in the work.

There are many things that make up life but I try to focus on the things that make me happy and I want people to get that same feeling from my work. I feel the older the memory, the more joy it gives when you think about it. Nostalgia never ends; sometimes it can be gotten from something that happened a couple of months ago. Without nostalgia, my work just feels incomplete.

ao: you spoke earlier about the body of work being inspired in part by old photographs you came across and I was thinking about your engagement with archives and the role they play in your work.

DO: There is a part of each photograph that influences the work. I don't just pick random images, I pick photographs that evoke a certain memory. The photographs were like a blueprint upon which the work is built. There is a painting I did, Daydreaming II and it came from a photograph of me receiving an award for best student in primary school. In the painting, you see a young person reading and an award in the background. I am very intentional about the pictures I use. Hopefully, I will showcase the photo album so people see what I am talking about.

ao: Earlier you spoke about the use of space in composing your paintings and one thing your work does is evoke a sense of home and familiarity. On the one hand, it's intimate and on the other, it feels quite mundane which I think speaks to the general idea of life. I am curious about your idea of home, what has your experience of it been like? Also now that you share a space with a lot of other people, what is your current experience of home?

DO: Wherever I find myself, I try to make a home out of it. I am an easygoing person and I get on well with people, no matter the differences. Growing up, my family wasn't really a 'happy family' but I did not let that influence my life. There were the good days and I think that is where this whole exploration of nostalgia originated from. No matter how hard it is, home is still home. A home could be the family that gave birth to you or it could just be the people that make you feel special and welcome. In one of my pieces, you see people just lounging, and it is all about living and just being. I enjoy seeing people zone out because my mind goes: what are they thinking? What is going on in their head? I don't really want to get into their head but I want to enjoy the mystery of not knowing.

ao: **You employ two distinct approaches in depicting your subject's bodies. On the one hand, there is a realistic approach and on the other is an exploration of negative images. This is something that has been present in your work for quite a while. Could you speak about what prompted this fascination with the negative image?**

DO: The negative approach came when a friend of mine was telling me about digital art taking over and traditional art going down, and I began to think of a way to bring technology and traditional art together. So I came up with this idea where I paint some of my figures in negative. Since the image is negative, it is going to be very 'loud' and attract the viewer and it can be inverted back to positive using a smartphone. This then becomes a way for the viewer to interact with the work and see the figure in a different light. Since we live in the technological age and almost everything is seen through our phones, I want the viewer to closely engage with each piece, creating an interactive experience.

ao: **It's interesting that you're talking about technology now, because I think it's a recurrent feature in your work, from exploring objects and technology from a past time to the present-day viewing of your work. In thinking about this idea of living life, technology has become a huge part of our entire lives. Was it something you were particularly thinking about, especially how it relates to daily life?**

DO: It's part of the reason I decided to work on this particular project because technology has always existed and keeps on evolving and I try to bring that into my work. Everything now is all digital and with my work, I am exploring the fusion of old technology with the digital viewing experience of the present. It's a juxtaposition of two different eras or spaces. This was done intentionally because I want people to interact with the work.

ao: coming to your studio is always very exciting because there are all of these artists working together in the same space as well as people just coming around and I see how that can help in creating compositions and scenes. What has the experience been like? and how would you say this communality has influenced the work that you do?

DO: Well, it's been great. Doing this project with other artists around helped a lot, because sometimes when I feel stuck I can call other people for a conversation. Here, when any artist has an idea for a piece, he just talks to the rest of us and we offer suggestions. Since I work with a lot of characters, everybody shares their opinion on how best to compose the figures and I make my decision from all the input. Sometimes I don't get models to pose for me, I like taking stuff unaware from around the studio and merging random images together. I make a small sketch and then start working on it. The process of sharing ideas has influenced me greatly because the people who I share space with are also artists, some went to art school, others are self-taught like I am and when we all share ideas it helps me figure out the best approach to my work.

adeoluwa oluwajoba works as a curator at Rele Gallery.



#1, Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 36in, 2022



#2, Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 30in, 2022



#3, Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 36in, 2022



#4, Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 36in, 2022

David Otaru

David Otaru (b.1991) is a self-taught artist from Edo state, Nigeria. In 2020 Otaru participated in the 2020 edition of Rele Arts Foundation's Young Contemporaries Bootcamp and was selected in 2021 as part of the Rele Arts Foundation Young Contemporaries. He held his first solo exhibition Party Series in Rele Gallery, Los Angeles in 2021. Select group exhibitions include Gentle Distractions (2022), Août gallery, Beirut, and It's a Wrap (2021), Rele Gallery, Lagos.

David Otaru is billed to have his museum debut in 2023. He holds a degree in English and Literature Education from the University of Benin, Nigeria. He lives and works in Lagos

32, Thompson Avenue,
Ikoyi, Lagos

(+234)809-321-5460
art@rele.co

