

Press Release: May 2024

NGENI OMUKU: THE DANCE OF PEOPLE AND THE NATURAL WORLD

29 June to 29 September 2024



Nengi Omuku *Eden*, 2022. Oil on sanyan 224 x 520 cm, 88 ¼ x 204 ¾ in (PH10463)
Courtesy the artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London. © Nengi Omuku.
Photography by Mark Blower.

This Summer Arnolfini invites audiences to journey into the lush landscapes of Nigerian artist Nengi Omuku's exhibition *The Dance of People and the Natural World*.

In her work Omuku immerses human figures within nature, highlighting the relationship between both individual and collective thought and ideas of belonging. These psychological spaces move beyond traditional hierarchies of western landscape painting, allowing both nature and humans, and past and present to coexist.

A sense of temporality is deeply embedded in her choice of material, sanyan, a pre-colonial Nigerian textile woven from moth silk and cotton and used traditionally for celebratory clothing.

The Dance of People and the Natural World brings together works first shown at Hastings Contemporary where the exhibition began in 2023. It includes the monumental work *Eden*, in which figures travel throughout a multicoloured landscape, under pale blue and purple skies, alongside new additions such as *Quorum* (2022) and *Rumours of War* (2023) drawn from the same period.

Omuku, who lives and works in Lagos, was also trained in floristry following in the footsteps of her horticulturalist mother whose own delicate coloured pencil drawings have inspired Omuku's work.

Her paradisaical landscapes and gardens are sometimes inspired by real places, such as Monet's Garden in Giverny, France, and the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture in Ibadan, Nigeria, where Omuku spent time on a Kobomoje Artist Residency. Her works often combine memories of her mother's garden alongside imagined places, allowing flora and fauna to take on fantastical otherworldly forms and colours, as well as more familiar shapes of plants like Monstera or Heliconia.

Yet, whether real or imagined, there is a sense that these are landscapes to long for or to seek solace in as Omuku looks back at happier times, a continual theme since her solo exhibition *Parables of Joy* (2022) in which her figures marked the 'slow passage of time'.

Referring to her work as ‘a state of mind’ Omuku’s figures often arise from collaged images drawn from archival photography and the media. These figures appear in acts of ritual or in solitary moments, such as *Red Velvet* (2022) in which a seated woman in cerise skirts leans against an ochre tree and burnt orange background looking outwards beyond the life contained in Omuku’s painting.

Omuku’s rich and dreamlike colour palette has been strongly influenced by the muted tones of the Sanyan cloth she uses as a support, bringing together Western traditions of oil painting – from her studies at the Slade School of Art in London – with Nigeria’s rich legacy of textile craftsmanship: *“The reason why I work with Sanyan has to do with nostalgia, longing for a time in Nigeria where things were beautiful, full of meaning, and textiles were something that were celebrated so profoundly.”*

Upon returning to Lagos in 2012 Omuku began collecting Sanyan, carefully sourcing and storing each piece and waiting for the right work to bring it back to life, such as with *Wade in the Water* (2023), in which figures are half submerged in a pool of water or lounge beside it on grassy banks.

Hung away from the gallery wall or suspended from ceilings, Omuku allows the audience to see both sides of each painted cloth, which she refers to as a ‘piece of art in its own right’, revealing also the original symbolic artistry and patterns, such as prayers of fertility woven within. During a recent residency at Black Rock Senegal Omuku learnt to spin cotton under the tutelage of contemporary female spinners employed by Fatim Soumare weavers on the island of Mar Loj, processing the raw material for herself. She now works with spinners outside of Lagos to create Sanyan cloths to size.

This commitment to her practice is also apparent in the message of therapeutic hope contained within her landscapes, which often create moments of rest and repose. Inspired by a commission from London based charity Hospital Rooms to paint a mural at Maudsley Hospital, Omuku has subsequently founded her own charity The Art of Healing in Lagos, which recognises the healing power of art.

Nengi Omuku's *The Dance of People and the Natural World* is one of two summer exhibitions at Arnolfini alongside Adébayo Bolaji: *In Praise of Beauty*.

The Dance of People and the Natural World was originally exhibited at Hastings Contemporary and adapted for Arnolfini.

HASTINGS CONTEMPORARY

- ends -

For further information please contact Sara Blair | sara.blair@arnolfini.org.uk

Additional images are available <https://bit.ly/NengiOmukuArnolfini>

@ArnolfiniArts Instagram / Threads / Linkedin / Facebook /
www.arnolfini.org.uk

LISTING:

Nengi Omuku : The Dance of People and the Natural World

29 June to 29 September 2024, Tuesday - Sunday, 11am - 6pm. Free, donations welcome. Arnolfini, 16 Narrow Quay, Bristol BS1 4QA 0117 917 2300

arnolfini.org.uk @ArnolfiniArts

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Images here: <https://bit.ly/NengiOmukuArnolfini>

NOTES TO EDITORS

About Nengi Omuku

Nengi Omuku (born 1987, Nigeria) lives and works in Lagos, Nigeria. She received her BA (2010) and MA (2012) from the Slade School of Art, University College London. Omuku is currently included in *Soulscapes* at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London (2023-24) and *Exchanges*, a collection presentation at the Whitworth, Manchester.

In 2022, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, presented *Parables of Joy*, the artist's first solo exhibition with the gallery. Other recent exhibitions include *The Dance of People and the Natural World*, the artist's first institutional solo exhibition at Hastings Contemporary (2023); *Aso Oke: Prestige Cloth from Nigeria*, Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri (2023-24); *As Water Never Touched*, Kirstin Hjellegjerde, West Palm Beach, Florida, (2023); *Free The Wind, The Spirit, and The Sun*, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London (2023); *Rites of Passage*, curated by Péjú Oshin, Gagosian, London (2023); Bangkok Art Biennale (2022-2023); *Dissolving Realms*, curated by Katy Hessel, Kasmin Gallery, NY (2022); and *What Lies Beneath: Women, Politics, Textile*, The Women's Art Collection, Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge (2022). Collections include Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland; Whitworth, Manchester; Women's Art Collection, Murray Edwards College, Cambridge; and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, Florida.

Omuku is represented by Pippy Houldsworth, London, Kristin Hjellegjerde, London, and The Kasmin Gallery, New York. www.instagram.com/nengiomuku

PIPPY HOULDSWORTH GALLERY

About Arnolfini

Woven into the fabric of Bristol since 1961, Arnolfini is an international centre of interdisciplinary contemporary arts, presenting an ambitious and wide-ranging programme of visual art, performance, dance, film, and music.

Housed in Bush House, a prominent 19th century former warehouse on the city's harbourside, Arnolfini is a pioneering, inspiring public space for arts and learning, offering an innovative, inclusive and engaging experience for all.

Arnolfini has welcomed artists from around world throughout its history – sharing works by Paula Rego, Jannis Kounellis, John Akomfrah, Grayson Perry, Rachel Whiteread, Peter Doig, Richard Long, Veronica Ryan, Chantal Joffe, Sonia Boyce, Alice Kettle and Frank Bowling, to name just a few - as well as supporting talent from in and around Bristol.

Alongside its main programme, Arnolfini is a centre of everyday creativity and learning, working with a wide range of community and artistic partners, while continuing to explore and develop new collaborations across the city and beyond. Spaces are used regularly by families, schools and colleges, health and wellbeing groups.

Through sharing a 63+ year archive of exhibition slides, publications and an extensive artist book collection, Arnolfini celebrates its heritage and the wide-reaching impact the organisation has had since its foundation.

From 2019, Director Gary Topp and team have sought to honour Arnolfini's founder Jeremy Rees' principle to 'Enjoy Yourself', welcoming everyone into the accessible space, and inviting engagement, in any number of ways.

Arnolfini is part of the University of the West of England and a key element of their City Campus. An independent charity (CIO), Arnolfini is supported by Arts Council England and the Ashley Clinton Barker-Mills Trust. www.arnolfini.org.uk

About UWE Bristol

The University of the West of England (UWE Bristol) has a global and inclusive outlook, with approximately 36,000 students and strong industry networks and connections with over 1,000 employers. Research at UWE Bristol focuses on real world problems and the University plays a pivotal role in the regional economy. With over £300 million invested in infrastructure, buildings and facilities across all Campuses, UWE Bristol is creating a place for learning that is innovative, ambitious, connected, enabling and inclusive. UWE Bristol is ranked 43rd out of 122 institutions in The Guardian university league table. www.uwe.ac.uk

About Arts Council England

Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture. We have set out our strategic vision in Let's Create that by 2030 we want England to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish and where everyone of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences. From 2023 to 2026 we will invest over £440 million of public money from Government and an estimated £93 million from The National Lottery each year to help support the sector and to deliver this vision. www.artscouncil.org.uk.

About Ashley Clinton Barker-Mills Trust

Arnolfini has been supported by a linked charity, the Ashley Clinton Barker Mills Trust (ACBMT) for almost 60 years.

Arnolfini founders Jeremy and Annabel Rees were first introduced to the artists and benefactors Peter and Caroline Barker-Mill in 1963, by the London gallerist Lesley Waddington. It was a fortuitous meeting that was the catalyst in allowing Arnolfini to develop from a small volunteer-run private gallery into a major international arts centre.

The Ashley Clinton Barker-Mills Trust (ACBMT) principle is to work with Arnolfini, primarily by making annual grants from the income earned on its investments, as well as funding modest, one-off capital grants to help the Arnolfini transition to its current financial model. In more recent years members of the ACBMT have become more involved working with Arnolfini to help plan its future.
www.arnolfini.org.uk/about/ashley-clinton-barker-mills-trust