

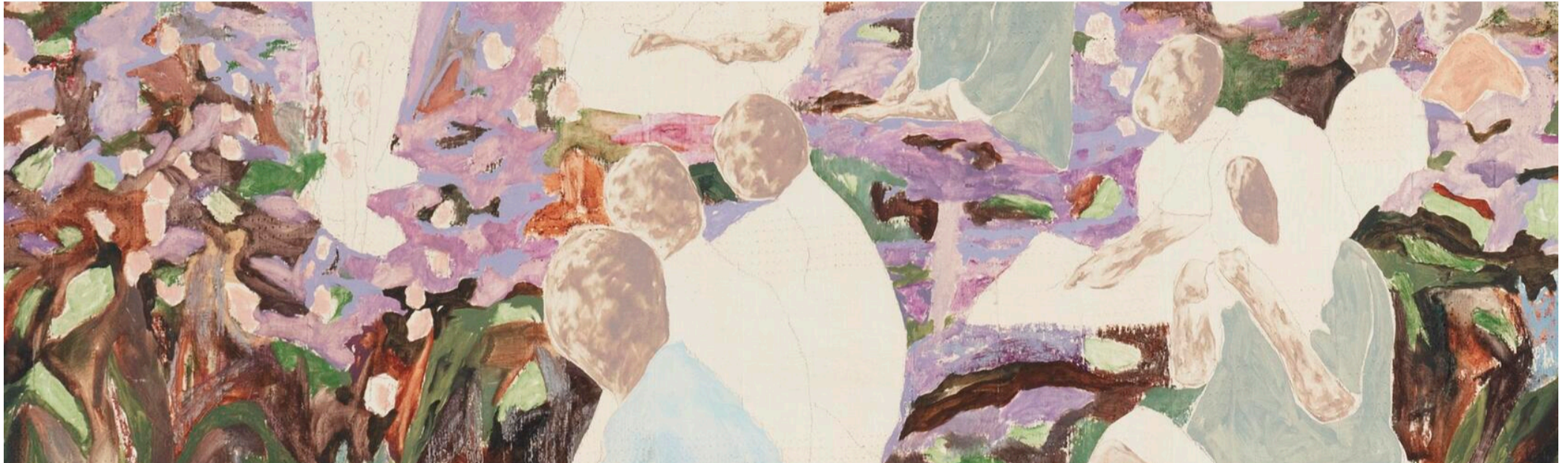


## Nengi Omuku's Paintings Traverse Physical and Psychological Realms

The artist, whose works merge western and West African heritage, wants her paintings to express a universal resonance



BY EMILY STEER IN PROFILES | 06 AUG 24



Fiery brushstrokes fly across the surfaces of Nengi Omuku's paintings, abstracting the bodies, interiors and landscapes that fill them. Her works – many of which are painted onto sanyan, a traditional handwoven silk fabric from the artist's native Nigeria – complicate the distinctions between solid object and spectral mark, psychological and physical realms. 'I'm operating in very different worlds,' she tells me, when we speak ahead of her solo show, 'Wild Things and Perennials', which opens at Kasmin, New York, in early September. 'A lot of my family is in London, so when I returned to Nigeria after studying at Slade School of Fine Art, I felt like an outsider. Even when working with oils on sanyan, I'm aware that I'm bringing together western and West African heritage. I really enjoy being in the middle. It helps me have a broader view of the world.'



Nengi Omuku, 'The Dance of the People and the Natural World', 2024, installation view.  
Courtesy: Kasmin, New York; the Arnolfini, Bristol and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery;  
photograph: Lisa Whiting

Fabric has played a central role in Omuku's paintings since art school. Her early works, such as *Bodija Heiress* (2013), lingered over rich patterns and folds of cloth, exploring the cultural signifiers of their markings. Her more recent works on sanyan bring contemporary painting into conversation with a traditional form of Yoruba craftsmanship that has been largely displaced by mass-produced fabrics. For her exhibition at Kasmin, she is hanging works from the ceiling, so that viewers can also see the original weavings on the verso. As Omuku sees it, she is working with pre-existing pieces of art. Having recently learned to spin cotton in Dakar, the artist has connected directly with sanyan weavers and, for some of her paintings in 'Wild Things and Perennials', has commissioned them to make new sanyan fabric. 'It's a way of trying to keep this traditional alive, because sanyan can't compete with fast fashion.'

As suggested by its title, the exhibition explores another idea that is central to Omuku's life and work: nature. Her mother is a horticulturist, and the artist discovered a kinship with plants when she worked as a florist during school holidays. To begin with, she kept these two interests separate, but the healing potential of plants and our interconnected relationship with nature now thread through much of her work. 'In some of my earlier pieces, when I painted flowers, I would leave them blank,' she tells me. 'It wasn't until I went to Giverny and saw Monet's garden and artworks that I realized it was OK to paint what I know.' Her use of plants is multi-layered: connecting with her own experience of working in nature as a psychologically healing activity, the plants and humans she depicts are vivid forces of energy; but the works' wild compositions, teetering on the brink of destruction, also speak to environmental concerns.



Nengi Omuku, *Orange Bougainvillea*, 2024, oil on sanyan, 2.2 × 2.2 m. Courtesy: Kasmin, New York

'I felt a shift during the pandemic when people really started to appreciate the natural world,' Omuku says. 'Nature was thriving when we were forced to slow down.' Since then, her exhibition 'The Dance of the People and the Natural World' has toured from Hastings Contemporary to Arnolfini, Bristol, where it is currently on view until September. The works in the show reflect on gardens that carry personal significance for the artist – such as her mother's – as well as public ones, including the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture in Ibadan, and her own imagined, fantastical verdant spaces. 'It was a way to bring everything together and to explore this idea of cohabiting with, instead of dominating, nature.' Having been nominated by Yinka Shonibare, Omuku will present new works in Frieze London's Artist-to-Artist section and, from October, she is included in 'The Poetics of Dimensions', a group show at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco, guest-curated by Larry Ossei-Mensah, which celebrates artists whose work utilizes quotidian materials to elicit a sense of the sublime.



Nengi Omuku, 'The Dance of the People and the Natural World', 2024, installation view.  
 Courtesy: Kasmin, New York; the Arnolfini, Bristol and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery;  
 photograph: Lisa Whiting

In recent years, Omuku has more fully explored the psychological aspect of her practice by working with mental health in-patients. Following her collaborations with Hospital Rooms, a charity which brings contemporary artists into wards around the UK, she has set up The Art of Healing in Lagos, likewise intended to take art into psychiatric wards. 'You see the immediate shift [in patients] before and after the workshops,' she tells me. Whether created for a psychiatric hospital or a gallery, Omuku's works vividly express the mind. 'Within the paintings themselves, I am talking about places of rest, places where I find solace,' she says. 'The paintings don't all look alike. I want to be responsive to each emotion and paint from that.' Sometimes a work will provide the artist with a meditative moment, she tells me. Such was the case with *I Can't Feel My Legs* (2024), which features in 'Wild Things and Perennials'. In these moments, Omuku's anxious thoughts disappear while the meticulous movements of a tiny brush over the surface create silence in her mind. At other times, her frustration or anxiety might become part of the work.



Portrait of Nengi Omuku in her studio. Courtesy: Kasmin, New York; photograph: Anny Roberts

It is important for Omuku that her paintings, despite their specific references to place and tradition, are understood universally. Her figures are often abstracted to remove the markers of gender, age or race that might create a feeling of otherness or perceived difference. 'For me, it's about the experience of being human, as opposed to all these things that cause division,' she says. 'I want anyone from any culture, race or background to walk up to one of my works and think: "This is how I feel today." That is a successful painting for me.'

*Nengi Omuku's **'The Dance of the People and the Natural World'** is on view at Arnolfini, Bristol, until 29 September 2024.*

***'Wild Things and Perennials'** will be on view at Kasmin, New York, from 4 September to 24 October 2024*

*Nengi Omuku's project for Frieze London's Artist-to-Artist will be jointly presented by Kasmin Gallery and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery*

*Main image: Nengi Omuku, The Lighthouse (detail), 2021, oil on sanyan, 2.2 × 2.3 m. Courtesy: Kasmin, New York*



**EMILY STEER**

Emily Steer is an editor and journalist based in London, UK.

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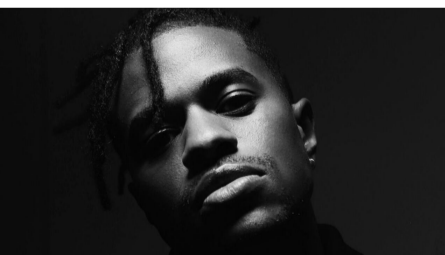
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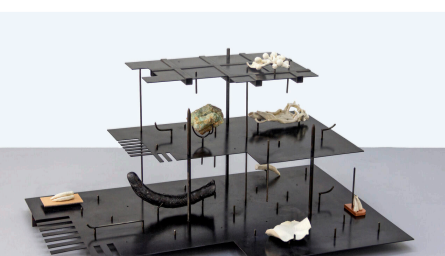
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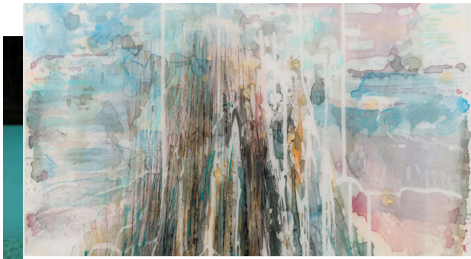


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