Odili Donald Odita, in conversation with the author, September 18, 2008.


Robert Storr, Think with the Senses Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense, vol. 1 (52nd Venice Biennale, 2007), 262.


ODILI DONALD ODITA
Born 1966 in Enugu, Nigeria
Lives and works in Philadelphia, PA

Education
1990 MFA Bennington College, VT
1988 BFA Ohio State University

Recent Selected Solo Exhibitions
2008 Double Edge, Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
Third Space, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania
Equalizer, The Studio Museum, New York, NY
2007 Give Me Shelter, 52nd Venice Biennale, Italy
Flow, Contemporary Arts Center, Kaplan Hall, Cincinnati, OH
2006 Fusion, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY

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Television
JANUARY 17 – APRIL 26, 2009

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Television

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Odili Donald Odita
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Standing in front of the TV, remote in hand, you press the power button and—for a split second—there’s a flash, a silent moment of light before the once dark screen fills with images and sounds. For painter Odili Donald Odita, this instant, devoid of clear pictures or language, is both “abstraction in the purest sense” and “a point of beginning or possibility.” Odita recalls as a child constantly turning the television on and off, fascinated by these moments of potential. He also loved television test-band patterns, the distorted image that would appear when pausing a VHS tape, and the cacophony of colors and shapes that blink in and out of view when clicking through channels rapidly.

For Odita these “quick beginnings of images” encouraged “looking and wondering about something outside of yourself,” and, years later, inform his artistic conceptions of space. As a graduate painting student, he was encouraged to embrace the formalist idea that a painting’s reality existed within, and only within, the space of the canvas. But this limitation ran counter to his interests in—and rich experiences of—images on television, images that seemed to extend into virtual worlds beyond the edges of the screen and behind it. A factory job making computer-embroidered logos furthered Odita’s questioning. He remembers:

“… staring at the computer screensaver where you have things shooting out from the screen, and then imagining and getting into the phenomenon of these electronically produced images .... You get this idea that you’re in space, that you are in something that has depth, but it’s just in the electronic screen. It was fascinating to stare at that thing and to notice the space, and then the TV test-band pattern, going beyond the top and bottom and the left and right. You wonder if it continues beyond the edge when you know in fact that’s the end of the picture tube.”

This interest in the peripheries of an image’s existence—whether the edge of a screen or a canvas—relates to how Odita thinks about his own life. Born in Nigeria, but raised in Ohio, Odita’s experience living simultaneously as an African and an American have made him attentive to what it means to differ from those around you, often poised on the edge of a society or a community.

His signature paintings explore these edges. In them, myriad colored fragments collide and connect as they jolt across the painting’s surface. These complex interlocking geometries and contrasting hues function as meditations on not only the spaces of painting and his multicultural experiences, but also on a vision of the future. As he sketches his shapes on graph paper, assigns them colors, and then paints them in large scale, Odita keeps in mind a wide swath of visual imagery, from popular visual culture and mid-20th-century wallpaper patterns to memories of landscapes both local and global. He explains the importance of unifying these diverse and distinct elements: “The fusion I seek is one that can represent a type of living within a world of difference. No matter the discord, I believe through art there is a way to weave the different parts into an existent whole, where metaphorically the notion of a common humanity can be understood as real.”

In his Ulrich exhibition, Television, Odita not only fuses the colors and shapes in each painting, but also brings the paintings together in a carefully orchestrated, yet deliberately open-ended, dialogue. Three of these paintings are executed on traditional canvases. The others, however, are on colored sheets of Plexiglass. Odita has worked with this material before, but never so deliberately. The slick surfaces pointedly recall the television screens that have long captured his attention and further activate an already dynamic installation with their reflective properties.

Optical movement is critical to Odita’s work and has often prompted critics to compare him with the Op artists of the 1960s. Art historian Roald Nasgaard writes that Odita, “shares their perception of pictorial space as an energetic field of infinite possibilities, suspicious of fixed identities, embracing the unpredictable, the irrational and the transitory.” The comparison is apt and might be pushed even further. Odita also shares with many of the Op artists a belief in the democratic accessibility of such art. Although one can find in his paintings a rich dialogue with other artists and thinkers, no specific knowledge proves necessary to engage with the work. Any viewer finds rich visual pleasure in Odita’s seductive abstractions. Like the television flashes and blurs that have captivated the artist, his vibrant vectors are rich with metaphorical and referential possibilities, encouraging us to think about a world beyond and bigger than ourselves.

—Emily Stamey, curator of modern and contemporary art