



**Figure 1** *Hunting Season (Mother & Daughter)*, 2016. Charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper, 59 × 70½ in.  
© Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



# RESISTING the SINGULAR NARRATIVE

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*Toyin Ojih Odutola*

With an introduction by Deborah Frizzell

**T**oyin Ojih Odutola (b. 1985, Ife, Nigeria) makes enigmatic life-size drawings in charcoal, pastel, and pencil, rendering figures within implied pictorial narratives often set against backdrops of luxury and leisure. While the work is informed by her personal journey of having been born in Nigeria, then immigrating and settling into American culture in conservative Alabama, she deploys an array of sources drawn from art history to popular culture, literature to hashtag research. The nuanced details of the “worlds” surrounding her subjects form a kind of topographical map embracing the figures’ bodies, clothes, and accessories in colorful, intricate patterns and textures. Pictorial spaces are subtly distorted, often distended at odd angles, and linear perspective may suddenly flatten out. Pastels are finessed with her fingertips making background landscapes appear like fabrics and fabric folds read like terrain, while her figures’ black skin becomes a living landscape of shimmering richness with delicate sheen, varied tonalities and textures. Presented and scaled as grand-manner, historic narratives of the super-rich, this series features Ojih Odutola’s imaginative fictions. The artist is conceptually and aesthetically experimenting, stretching the





**Figure 2** *The Marchioness*, 2016. Charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper, 77½ × 50½ in. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

boundaries of representing blackness, and questioning the contemporary mania of wealth and glamor, structures of class and value, notions of gender, and formulaic traditions of representation. The artist's drawings appear matter-of-fact, and yet the play of space, form, and color may create discomfiting undercurrents that provoke questions about the viewer's own perceptions and experience.

Ojih Odutola is a visual storyteller who layers possible meanings and allusions as conceptual underpinnings, envisioning a world in which blackness is not a unilateral or simple signifier of race. Her visual language suggests an imaginary that is compelling, vibrant, and relevant, especially in opposition to the Trumpian worldview. Some of her art historical influences include two nineteenth-century painters of modern life, John Singer Sargent and James Tissot, while contemporary admired artists who expand the parameters of the representation of blackness and "presumed identity" would include Kerry James Marshall, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, and the late Barkley Hendricks, the master of the depiction of cool. But for Ojih Odutola, the written word, her fictional trilogy, is an impetus to her visual image making. She has created an epic story about two Nigerian families, the UmuEze Amara and the Obafemi: the first of an ancient noble heritage and the second a nouveau riche family enriched via trade and vineyards, echoing colonialist mercantilism and structural economic inequality. The male heirs from each family have fallen in love and married, a fantasy nurtured by the artist in opposition to actual laws in Nigeria, where being gay and marrying is illegal. Aristocracy and the newly rich thus consolidate their wealth, businesses, property, and privilege, and as part of that consolidation they commission portraits in which their



**Figure 3** *First Night at the Boarding School*, 2017. Charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper, 63¾ × 41½ in. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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**Figure 4** *Pregnant*, 2017. Charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper, 74½ × 42 in. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

posture, gestures, gaze, and accoutrements signify the aesthetics of wealth and luxury.

Instagram has been a platform for Ojih Odutola to respond to questions and discussions around notions of the artist's intensions: what meanings could we attribute to a fictional Marchioness in white silk pajamas and a full-length fur coat sitting regally in her chair surrounded by her gold-framed art collection displayed on Matisse-red walls? Because the artist deploys allusion and a mix of formal and conceptual strategies, questions arise from viewers about her own experiences and point of view. Below is a text from her posts about her perspectives on representing wealth and display, self-worth and identity, blackness, and spaces of imagination addressing issues raised by a series of articles on the artist in *Vogue* magazine (Felsenthal 2017; Kazanjian 2018; Smith 2018).

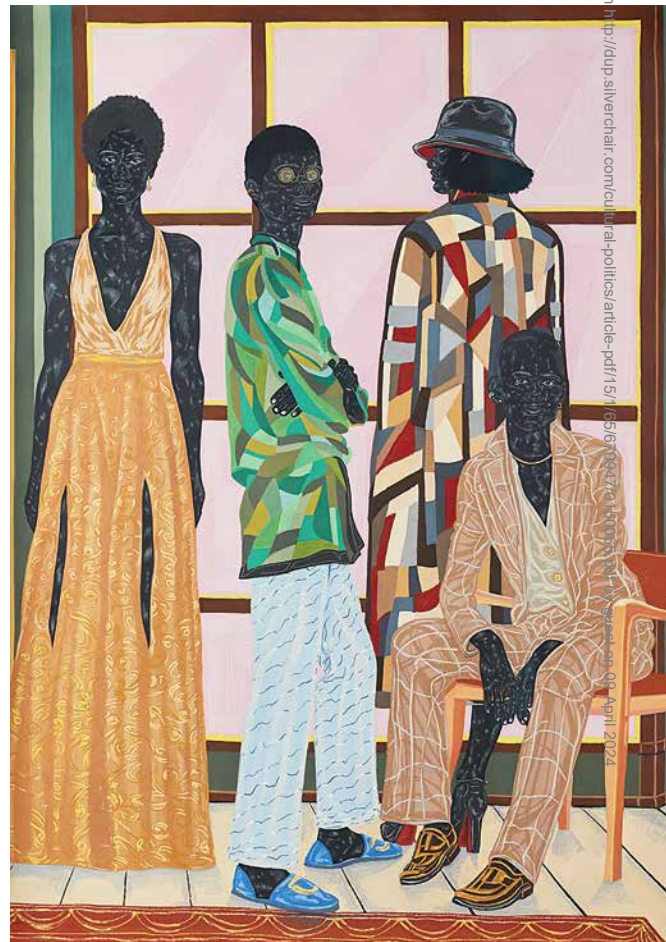
### ***Toyin Ojih Odutola***

To add, I would like to emphasize a point not fully addressed in the article @voguemagazine: a reason for black excellence as something we strive for should not be due to societal impositions and expectations, but by CHOICE for us to be excellent, because we want to create and do good work, to be better people—for ourselves, by ourselves.

I agree that some might see my comments about wealth not being an equalizer as a statement soaked in privilege. A la, “wealth isn’t such a big deal when you have it.” I see it and I know. What I have aimed to do with this family series is address the constant pushing towards wealth as the only aim for people to excel—that excellence comes ONLY with that marker, that exhibition and proof, when it shouldn’t; and as a society we can

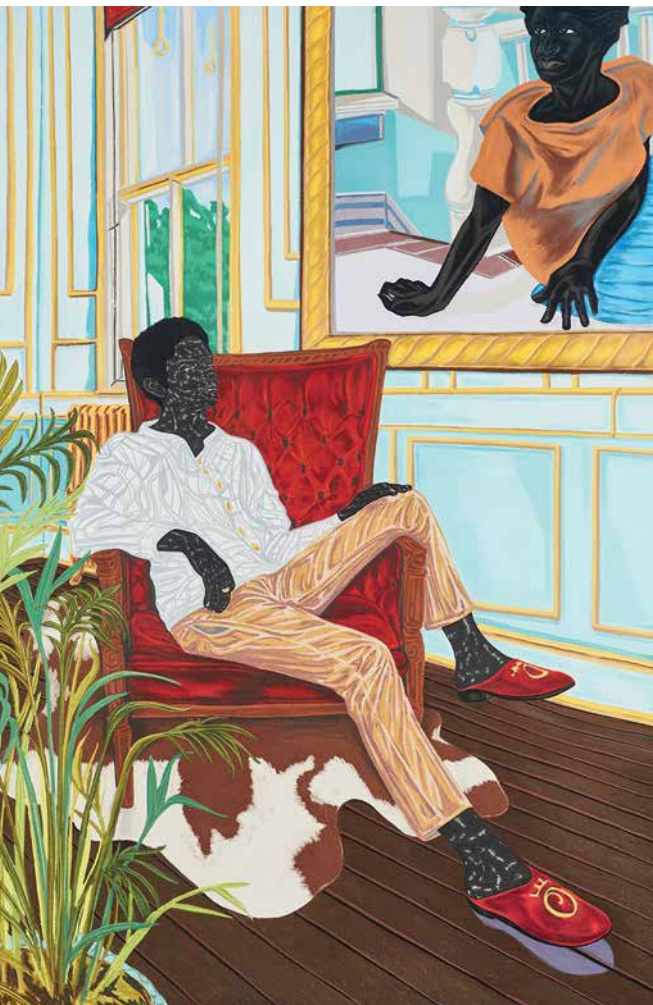
envision, discuss and enact better ways of working towards and expanding that.

I have seen excellence in all class demographics and forms; it can come from all manner of origins and places. What does it say to younger generations if all they see is wealth as a means of being free? THAT is my question. And furthermore, what does it say to young people about where they are at and how they can create wealth by their own definitions and resources of excellence not associated



**Figure 5** *The Adventuress Club, est 1922*, 2016. Charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper, 67½ × 49½ in. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.





**Figure 6** *A Grand Inheritance*, 2016. Charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper, 89 × 60 in. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

with money and the feelings of self-worth attached to it—without any comparisons to some type of unrealistic, hyperbolic ideal?

I'm not saying our society (in this capitalistic system we are ruled by) isn't full of problems which wealth cannot in many ways help alleviate; however, as an endgame it can be just as much a trap, just as flattening, and a curse when it comes to seeing all the beauty and richness in the world, especially for those who are seeking more enriching, true fulfillment and change.

Much love.—TOO

### Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Jim Blasi for the preliminary design. This artist statement is adapted from material originally posted on Instagram at [www.instagram.com/p/BleGunKhm0R/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BleGunKhm0R/).

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**Toyin Ojih Odutola** earned her BA from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and her MFA from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. She lives and works in New York. Among her exhibition highlights, Toyin Ojih Odutola includes the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2017–18); Brooklyn Museum, New York (2016); Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (2015); Studio Museum Harlem, New York (2015, 2012); Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield (2013); and Menil Collection, Houston (2012). Permanent collections include Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Baltimore Museum of Art, New Orleans Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Princeton University Art Museum, Spencer Museum of Art, and the National Museum of African Art (Smithsonian).

**Figure 7** *A Misunderstanding with the Mistress*, 2016. Charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper, 79½ × 60 in. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



