



BETWEEN THE LINES

Toyin Odutola creates viscerally stunning, intricately detailed images that are redefining the perception

of contemporary African art, how we look at the world and how we view ourselves. The Nigerian-born, American-raised artist employs a painstakingly thorough creative process that uses rudimentary tools – ballpoint pens, ink and paper – to investigate perceptions of ‘blackness’, gender and place. Seems like a handful for an artist who is just going into the second year of her Masters in Fine Arts at California College of the Arts. Already Odutola’s street buzz has caught the eye of both major collectors and celebrities, such as Solange Knowles. This spring she opened her first major solo exhibition, MAPS, at New York’s Jack Shainman gallery. As expected, it was an instant hit.

Since 2004 San Francisco-based Odutola’s artistic practice has evolved from imaginary into a more sequential cinematic narrative, featuring herself as the subject. Her work, both simple and detailed at the same time, stimulates a dialogue between the artist and the viewer. And it has a rawness – in part due to the medium of ballpen, part due to its microscopic imagery – that leaves the viewer in an emotional trance as they seek to decode it. What is striking about Odutola’s work is the absence of the typical cultural tropes associated with many popular contemporary African artists. “If I were too specific about my Nigerian identity, it would become this eroticisation of Nigeria,” she says. “I don’t feel like I’m an accurate participant in creating that narrative.”

Using her artistic platform as a conduit for women to create their own narrative, Odutola believes that, “we are active participants in decolonising our own spaces” and her art is a catalyst that ignites fresh debate around concepts of self. Certainly at the show opening in May, there was much discussion about what her imagery represented, literally, between the lines. “In many ways, it’s an exploration of the limits and possibilities of contradiction,” she told Think Africa Press. “The ability to transfer experiential geography onto a person never fails to excite me.”

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022 | ARISE

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