



O'DA

Abe Odedina

WALK LIKE
A CHAMPION

OCTOBER 2023

Curator's

Note

The privilege and joy to be able to show Abe Odedina's first solo in Lagos is most certainly one of the highlights of my 40th year.

As the artist will jokingly let you know, I wooed him with a persistent, gentle, but committed focus for over a year. Why? Not only because I am such a big fan of his work, but also because I believe very strongly that our local collecting base deserve to also be able to enjoy the magic of Abe's work.

What speaks to me the most about Abe's works is his depiction of powerful and self-assured subjects, whether human or otherwise. It typically exudes confidence, strength, and a sense of unapologetic self-worth. His art employs bold colors, strong lines, and dynamic compositions that convey a compelling presence and a message of self-assertion, inspiring viewers to stand tall and embrace their own pride and self-confidence.

Abe's works draw you in and transports viewers to enchanting realms beyond the ordinary. His imaginative settings, vibrant colors and whimsical details, evoke a sense of wonder and invites viewers to escape into a world where the impossible becomes possible.

"Walk like a champion" with this carefully curated body of work, we invite you to carry on with a graceful and powerful stride that reflects your inner strength, determination, and belief in your abilities. It's a metaphorical encouragement to approach life's challenges with unwavering confidence and a winning attitude. Enjoy.

- Obida Obioha

DEEP DIVE

Walk like a Champion

O'DA Art is pleased to present Abe Odedina's first solo exhibition in Lagos.

The artist was born in Ibadan, Nigeria and currently lives in London, UK and Salvador Bahia, Brazil, where after a successful decades-long career as an architect he started to paint in 2007 and never turned back. In 2019 he exhibited in ART X Lagos, the leading international art fair in West Africa, where his Mother finally had the chance to experience his work in person alongside colleagues and school friends alike. It was a family affair – a moment to share, delight, and connect in a context of creative expression.

This new body of work is a testament to this special gathering and the thrilling opportunity to finally exhibit in Nigeria again, to make a show for his Mother ahead of the centenary of her birth. It's title, the Odedina attests, 'is not about swagger. It's not about strutting around. It about what do you think a champion is? It's about being undefinably true to yourself... When we say "walk", it's in a more important sense than one foot in front of the other. It's how you go through life. It's the Big Walk.'

And whilst many of these individual portraits certainly suggest a sense of swagger... (first used in the late 1500's in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, through a query by the mischievous spirit Puck – in archetypal cahoots with the Yoruba trickster god Eshu – 'What hempen homespuns have we swaggering here?')

...they're not about an external manifestation, or an empty gesture. It's an undeniable awareness of what you are. Like in *Golden Boy Intercepts the Darts of Malice*, it's about how you deal with your surroundings. In the face of impending targets – curses, malintents, bad luck – you can stand you your ground, knock 'pon your entrance, and walk like

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a champion. The only thing hitting you is a golden light, kissing your cheekbones.

Abe Odedina is the fourth born in his family. For a significant period of time he was the only child at home, whilst others were away at University or boarding school, where he shared time with his Mother. She became his most resonant sounding board, confidante, role model, and friend. Today, he reflects that she is the author of him more than anybody else. The small but mighty painting *Size Matters* stands as a manifest testament to her impact and artist's profound respect of her presence. This vibrant work of red lipstick emerging from a gilded, glossy container casts a monumental shadow against the luscious magenta background, standing as a tribute to the powerful and audacious ways that makeup can be used to express oneself. For Odedina's Mother it was all about her nail varnish, permanently housed in a handbag which the artist had the honour to frequently fetch. Handbags reoccur in Odedina's oeuvre throughout the years, such as in his 2016 painting *Sweet Smell of Success*, featuring as prominent repositories of a women's power.

On the whole, the prevalent use of loaded, intuitive iconography is emblematic of the artist's characteristic use of everyday symbols for extraordinary storytelling. Like with the practice of putting on lipstick, "It's an extraordinary bit of signalling and mark-making" Odedina reflects. "It's the most audacious and powerful gesture... It changes everything. It's almost like you can now speak in tongues. You can literally now move mountains."

This idea of mark-making takes space not only on the artist's canvases, but also prominently on his body, considering to his decades-long endeavour of slowly and ceremoniously getting tattooed by an

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emerging local apprentice in Brixton. For Odedina, tattoos represent physical plasticity as a freedom of expression, at once personal yet symbolically universal. He fondly remembers how his Mother always told him and his siblings how beautiful they were, and how lucky she felt to have them. With this in mind, the artist reflects on a moment in adulthood when wanting to re-introduce himself and show his Mother his body – his tattoos, his ideas, his visual vernacular – in a gesture to simply ask: “What do you think about what I’ve done with your work?” This exhibition is another example of just that.

Every artist’s work is autobiographical to a certain extent. Odedina, however, typically strays away from biography. His series don’t adhere to strict narrative, but rather address how he responds to popularly used idioms, dispersed news, shared feelings – what he contends with in everyday and extraordinary settings. For *Walk Like a Champion*, the grounding ethos is to show his Mother a glimpse of the information he has consumed, what he values, and how these ideas can come to life through painting.

And so here we find bold, graphic works of singular figures that strongly declaim themselves, and look outward. Their main character energies distinctly implicate us, the viewers, to share the role of protagonist. In an effort to be as exemplary as possible, Odedina has turned towards his classic cast of characters: Eshu and Amazing Grace rub shoulders with golden boys and twin girls. James Brown finds himself in good company with a translator, tightrope walker, barber, tailor, and spring breaker. Cultural influences range from his parents and daughters to Zadie Smith and Iron Mike Tyson. What a party!

And all these folks have travelled to gather and meet Mother. Together,

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they are a tableau vivant – a living picture – a collection of family portraits. This exhibition thus communicates as much as an album, or the staircase wall in a domestic home lovingly cluttered with salon style headshots. The artist reminisces about his siblings all reuniting at home and gleefully going through old family albums, sifting through iconic images taken in West African photography studios. These are dreamscapes: places where your outfits, props, and backdrops enable you to be anyone, anywhere. On a plane or in a pool, in the barbershop or on a stage. Or simply just flying in the sky...

When Odedina first embarked upon his painting practice in 2007 whilst living in Brazil, the power of these kind of images is what came to mind. For him, the power of portraiture is much more than just a faithful or documentary gesture – it's complicated and creative. Scene and seen together in this context, it's all about "the relationship of the image, with the poetic life of the sitter, and their imaginations," the artist reflects. They're all composed, gentle, full of humility and importance. They are his sensibility, his make-up, his foundation. Like a family album, the works in this exhibition feel very special indeed when united all together, yet you can still take one out as a stand-alone, put it in your wallet, or on the wall of a distant loved one's home. As demonstrated in the quite moment of Seer, who is taking our own photograph, it's about looking, and asking: who's looking at whom, who is the subject, what are we capturing? For seeing is as spiritual as it is prosaic.

This new body of work exemplifies the artist's personal philosophies, whilst emphasising what he is eager to communicate – to his Mother, to us, to the world. His focus on composition, frames within frames, iconography, gilded objects, and seductive gazes all implicate the viewer

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and lay a foundation for the importance of communication at large. This is perhaps best epitomised in *The Translator*, readily identifiable by his golden linguist staff, symbolising a trained orator of a Ghanaian Asante royal chief. The symbol sitting atop these majestic object reference a unique proverb, indicating the character of the associated ruling elite. In this instance we find a bird, an enduring motif in Odedina's visual lexicon due to its relationship to the divine and the heavens. To the left of the linguist's ear is a swallow, a creature who travels across continents, whispering freedom. In this light we perceive how linguist act not only as diplomats, but as peacemakers. Their work, like these paintings, are about translating, not transposing. It's all about engaging with meaning.

And in a world where communication is key, we can find meaning in anything, from a divine swallow to an unexpected smile. In the radiant *Bonanza*, Odedina gives us the gift of the smile – a proper smile, without a semblance of quid pro quo. It's not a charged smile – it's a charging smile. An energy exchange through sweetness. It's not forced, it's force-filled. It's giving. It makes you feel like you've won the lottery, but better. Receive a smile like this from a stranger walking down the street and you've hit the jackpot. And knowing what birds signify in Odedina's iconographic landscape, we can perceive this smile is positively spiritual. A gift to give, and a gift to get. You're blessed.

And then there are smiles that take shape when your eyes are closed, radiating magic, like in *Say it Loud*. Here we find one of Odedina's heroes, James Brown, whom he tributes as much for being a human rights activist as a phenomenal performer. The microphone, his tool of amplification, is given not only compositional weight, but wings. It is magnifying important, divine words. This hybrid object is rendered

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in flux, in resonance, not entirely palpable. In another moment perhaps its wings won't be perceptible to the human eye – they may be beating too fast – but they're always there. He's an angel musician, a saviour, a magician. For aren't we are powerless in the face of music?

"It's about what you can do with a painting," the artist contends. "I'm curious about all the possibilities of figurative art to convey ideas. It's also about magic. I'm looking for that... It's the aspiration. It's more than documentary, it's more than technique, it's more than real. And yet it is real. It's true. And it has magic in a way that isn't silly." It's power.

In Odedina's world we find as much power in everyday magic as we do in extraordinary possibilities. He remembers the childhood nights spent falling asleep whilst being read the Bible by his Mother, finding so much power in the characters – and the drama! These stories recalibrated Odedina, establishing a practice that's not interested in documentary truth, rejection, or disbelief. It's about telling stories with discretion and conviction in anything but binaries, for this nuanced complexity was how he was taught to view the world by his mother. He was taught that life is rich, layered, and full of meaning. "She's wise in the coolest way," he reflects.

In *Victoria's Secret* the artist employs a new stencil-like technique with lace that he started experimenting with recently in Brazil in order to achieve this appreciation of physical and psychological layers. For what a better way to paint and elevate enigma? Through magenta underpainting, impressionistic brushwork, and a veil of lattice-work, we're invited to perceive this composed woman but not uncover her secrets... We perceive a safe and key in the background, as well as a golden sword and silver bullet protecting the figure. She's a woman with

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a history, which none of us know, who encourages us to look deep within ourselves and relate. It's a technically-laden declaration that people are complicated, and that you can embrace your contradictions.

In contrast to the downcast gaze of Victoria, we meet eye to eye with the sitter in *Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick*. Sat in a plush chair with the artist's same magic magenta underpainting, this figure wields a tall burning candle – in directional contrast to the shrouded sideways sword of our previous protagonist. Keeping in mind that candles are associated with time and spirituality, its phallic presence is a play on what may anchor one's strength, and is thus an invitation for us all to find our source. The tension between strength and softness is magnified by the looming black circle, referencing one of Odedina's favourite paintings, *Full Stop*, by Northern Rhodesian-born British conceptual artist John Latham. On first glance we may perceive this iconic abstract painting, but on another it's a black moon behind a window, or a spotlight, a halo. It's the source.

Many other portraits in *Walk Like a Champion* convey this nuanced environs, whereby discretion meets deliberation. In *Funambulist* we find an introspective tight-rope walker surrounded by his tools of access – a rope, compass, grapnel hook, book. This contemplative figure captures the essence of what it can be like to move through life, but his moment of self-composition begs the question if it's taking place just before or after the action? The open, fluttering pages of his book suggest possibilities – the story is still unwritten. The literally locked mouth of *A Significant Silence* also leans into this idea of stillness, not as a gesture of repression, but an act of prudence. For in situations where nothing needs to be said, you don't need a key. It's the difference between

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choosing silence, and being silenced. It's about discretion, deliberation.

And finally, in *Riding High*, we may ask: is this soaring figure a rising icon or descending cowboy? Is his fate that of Icarus, master craftsman Daedalus's mythological son who flew too close to the sun and burnt his wings – a Fallen Angel – or is he a pole jumper, a card player, a pilot? What is he flying? Odedina gives us all the keys to decipher any story. Yet there isn't ever one answer. This dramatical vertical work, in particular, is emblematic of the artist's tendency to paint over pieces, challenging their narrative and give them new life. In this current – and perhaps final – iteration, the figure's proportions have been distorted, his face is now looking up, and he's flying above the new additions of a swallow and a drone: entities with the potential to go anywhere.

"How can a painting be finished?" Odedina muses. "It's not a finite thing. It's a limitless possibility for experimentation. A painting can't be finished – it might stop, for many practical or good reasons – but to finish it would be denying the possibility of something more, or different."

Walk Like a Champion is ultimately about being comfortable with your undeniable, ever changing self. Abe Odedina was given the tools to walk like this from his Mother, who taught him to never be obstinate or inflexible about ideas, that you always have choice, and you have the freedom to explore. And through his practice, embracing figurative work comfortable with abstract concepts, the artist gifts these tactics to us. By unapologetically employing acrylic alchemy between different symbols and styles, Odedina births casually fantastic characters that we can see ourselves in.

And upon looking closer, we see that the red lipstick from *Size Matters*

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has found its way onto the lips of all the portraits featuring women. As the artist meditates upon the strong and sensuous figure in *A Cut Above* channelling the power of a pair of scissors – an object as capable of imparting violence as making mends, charged with as much protection as care – he acknowledges that this woman isn't someone to be messed with.

"There's got to be something of my Mother in that." He muses, "There's just something of her..."

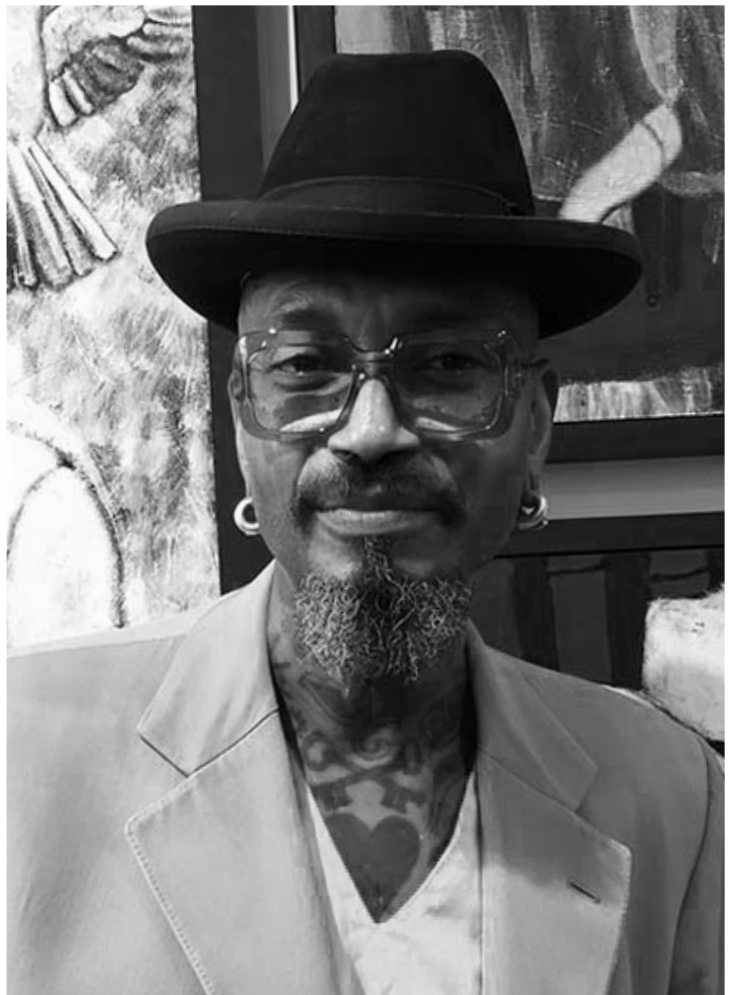
Note by **Katherine Finerty**

ARTIST BIO

Abe Odedina

Born 1960, Ibadan (Nigeria), now living in London (UK) and Salvador Bahia (Brazil), Abe Odedina had a successful architecture career before starting to paint on a trip to Brazil in 2007. Working on board rather than canvas, Odedina's tableaus embody all the solidity – and practicality – of shop fronts or municipal murals. Compositional elements of Renaissance portraiture, devotional painting and even pop art frame figures from diverse mythologies (Yoruba, Haitian, Ancient Greek) as well as passers-by or characters plucked from the artist's own imagination. 'If, like me, you don't have the discipline or the interest in holding these clear categories,' says Odedina, 'then maybe it's better to enjoy that morphing, from hard facts to poetry, from something to nothing.'

Recent exhibitions include : I'm a Believer, Ed Cross, London, 2023; Independent Art Fair, New York (2023); You Give Me Fever, Diane Rosenstein, Los Angeles (2022); When We See Us: A Century of Black Figuration in Painting, Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town (2022); Cutting Edge, Ed Cross at Clerkenwell Gallery, London (2021); In the Beginning (online), Ed Cross (2021); Just Looking, ArtX, Lagos (2020); Birds of Paradise, Ed Cross at Copeland Gallery, London (2019); Diaspora, New Ashgate Gallery, Farnham (2019); Get Up, Stand Up Now, Somerset House, London (2019); True Love, Ed Cross at The Department Store, London (2018) and Talisman in the Age of Difference, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London (2018).

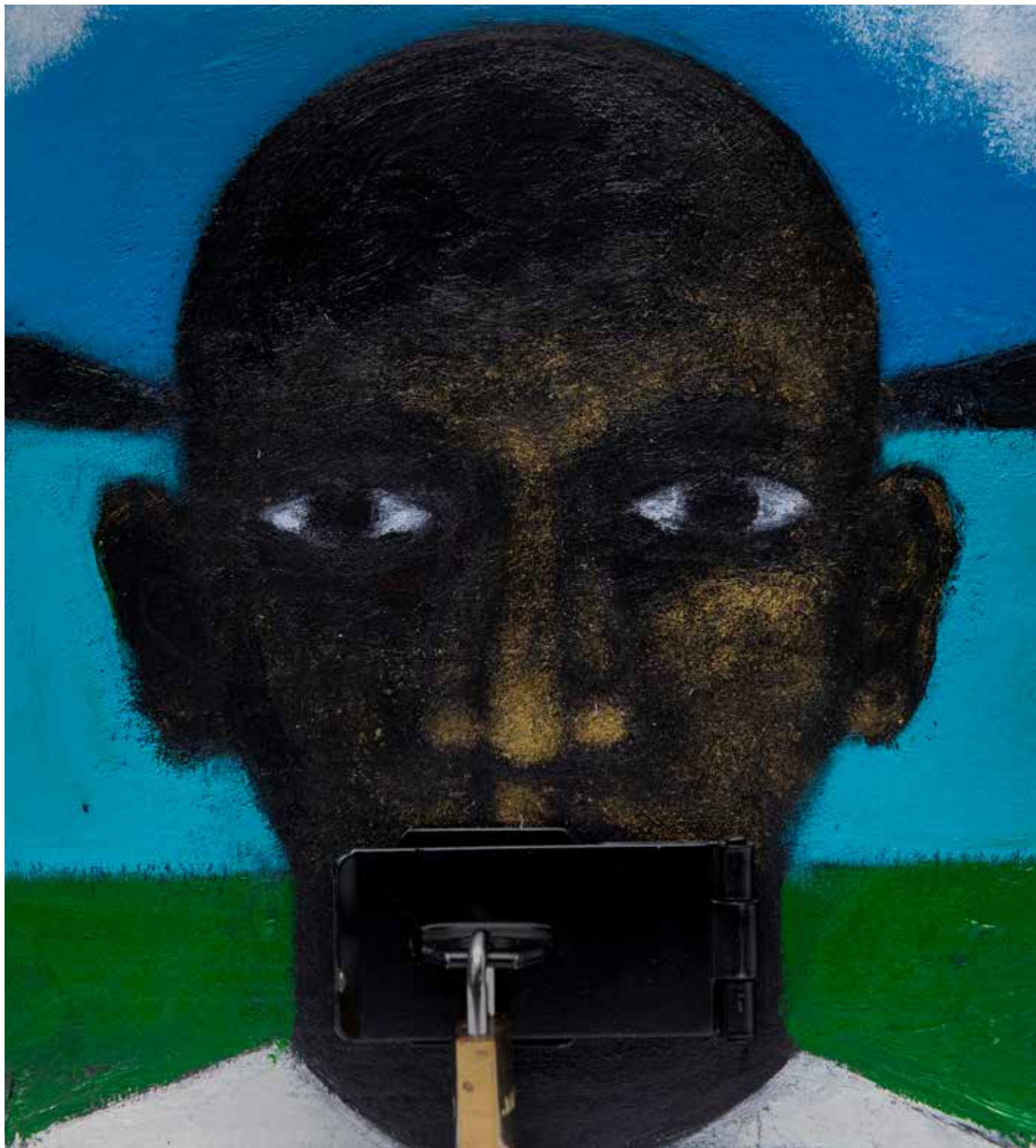




Just Looking, 2022

Acrylic on Ply

34.5 x 40.5 cm



The Significant silence, 2022

Acrylic hardwood steel

21 x 23 cm



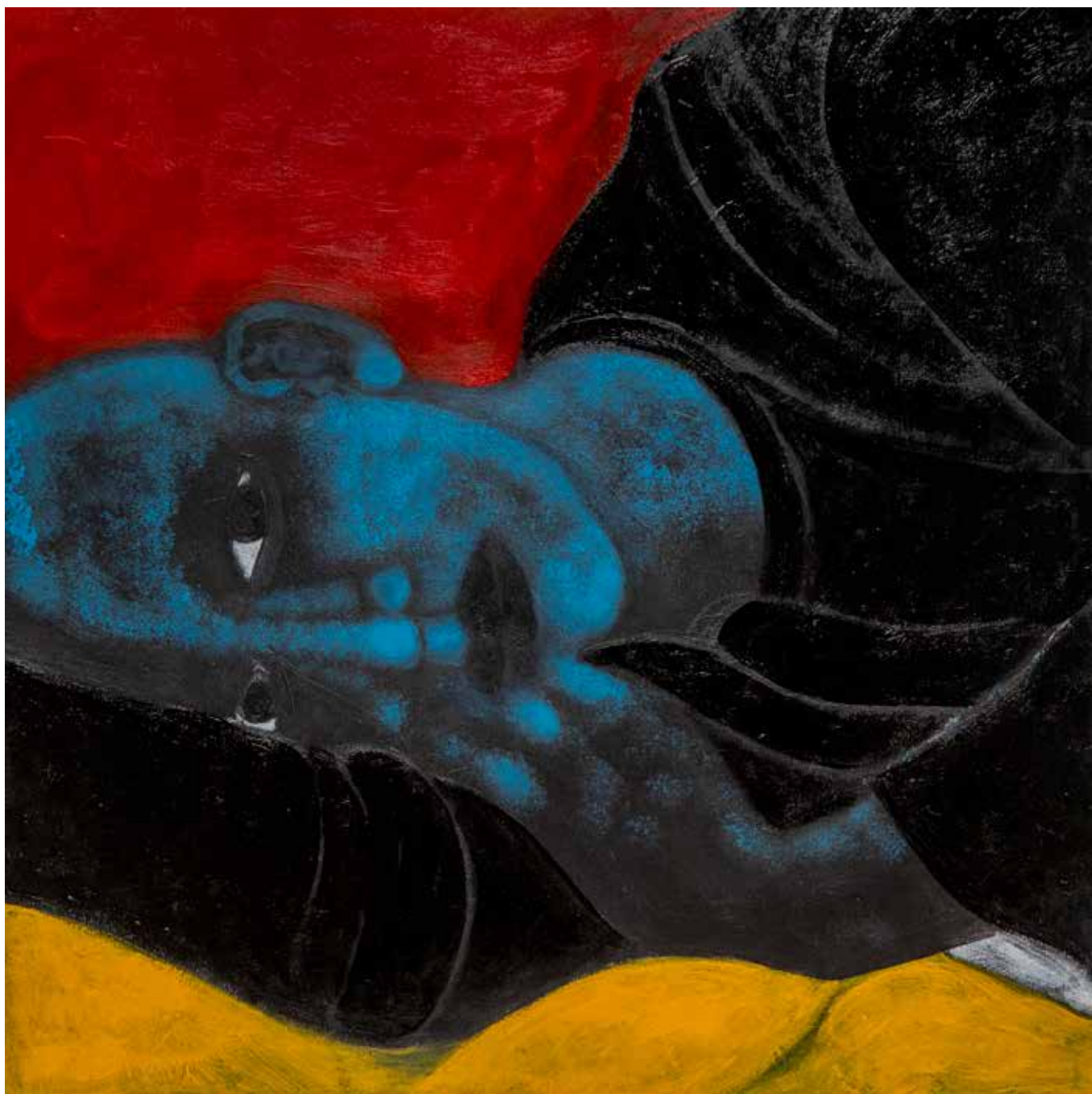
Amazing Grace, 2023

Acrylic on Ply

34 x 47 cm



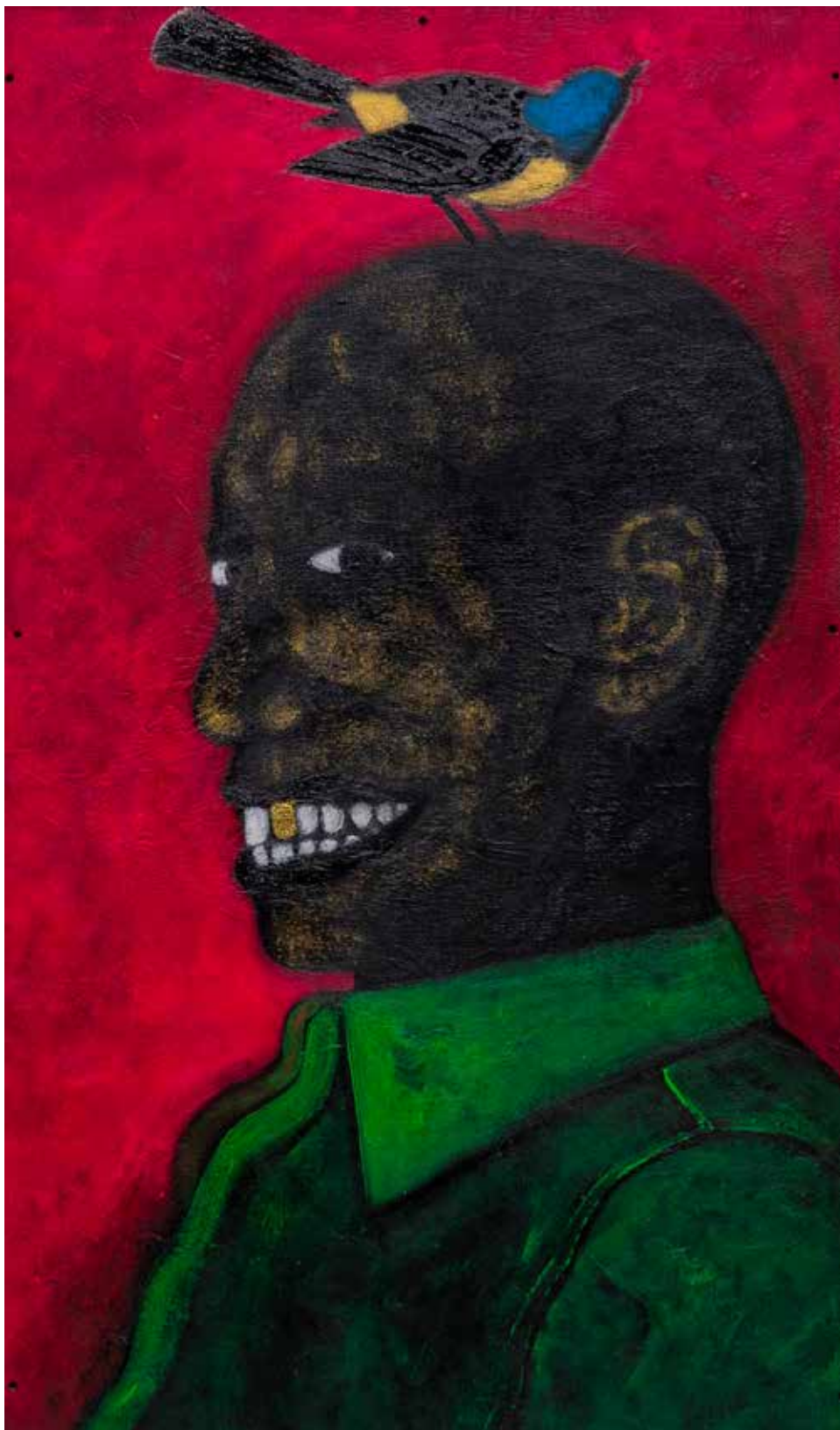
Full Blast, 2023
Acrylic on Woodblock
17.5 x 27 cm



Did the earth move for you, 2023

Acrylic on Ply

51 x 51 cm



Bonanza, 2023

Acrylic on Ply

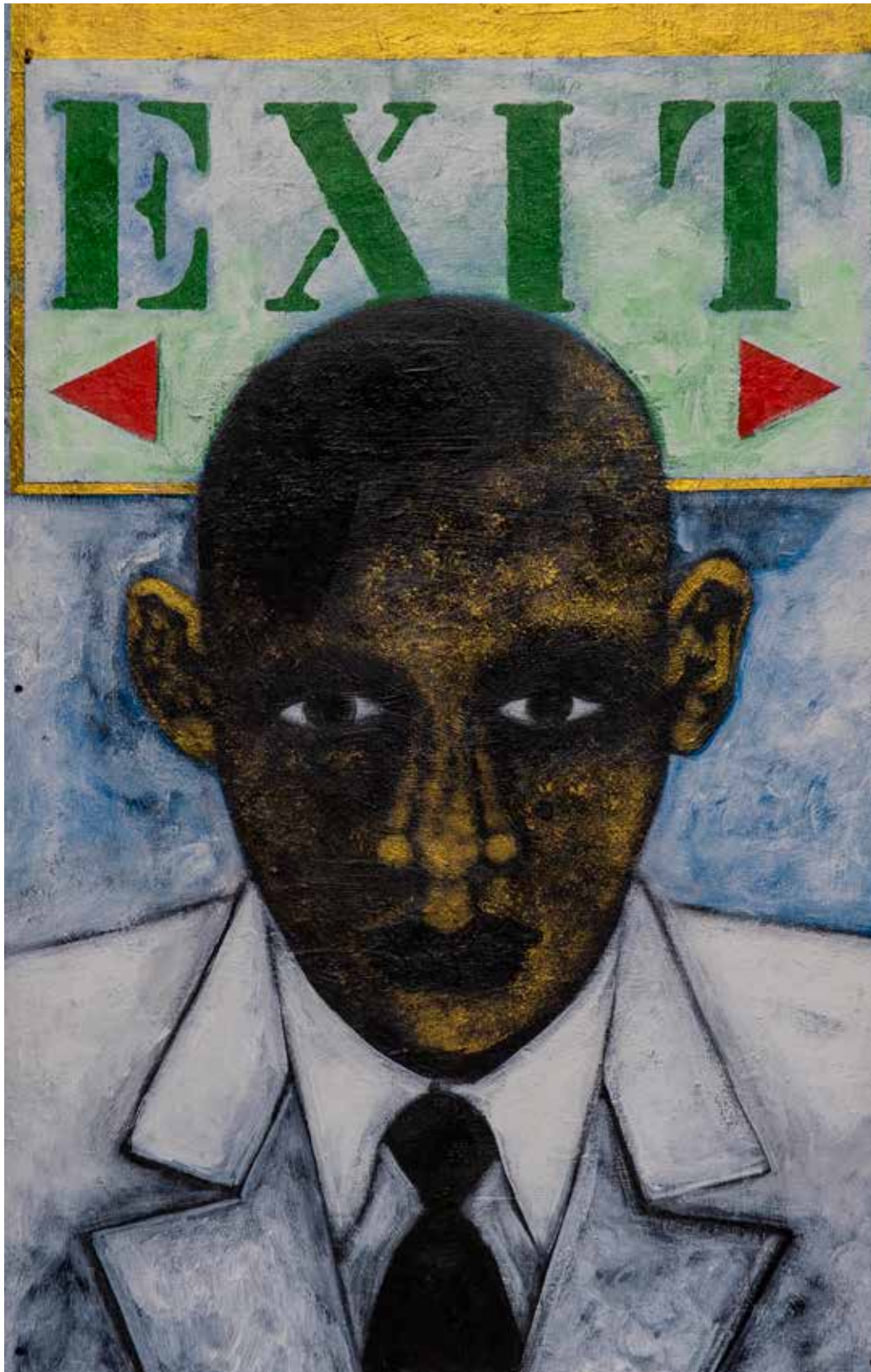
39.2 x 62.2cm



Size Matters, 2023

Acrylic on Ply

39.2 x 62.2cm



No Two Ways About It, 2023

Acrylic on Ply

39.2 x 62.2cm



Hard To Swallow, 2021-2023

Acrylic on Ply

36 x 57.7 cm



Say it out loud, 2022

Acrylic on Ply

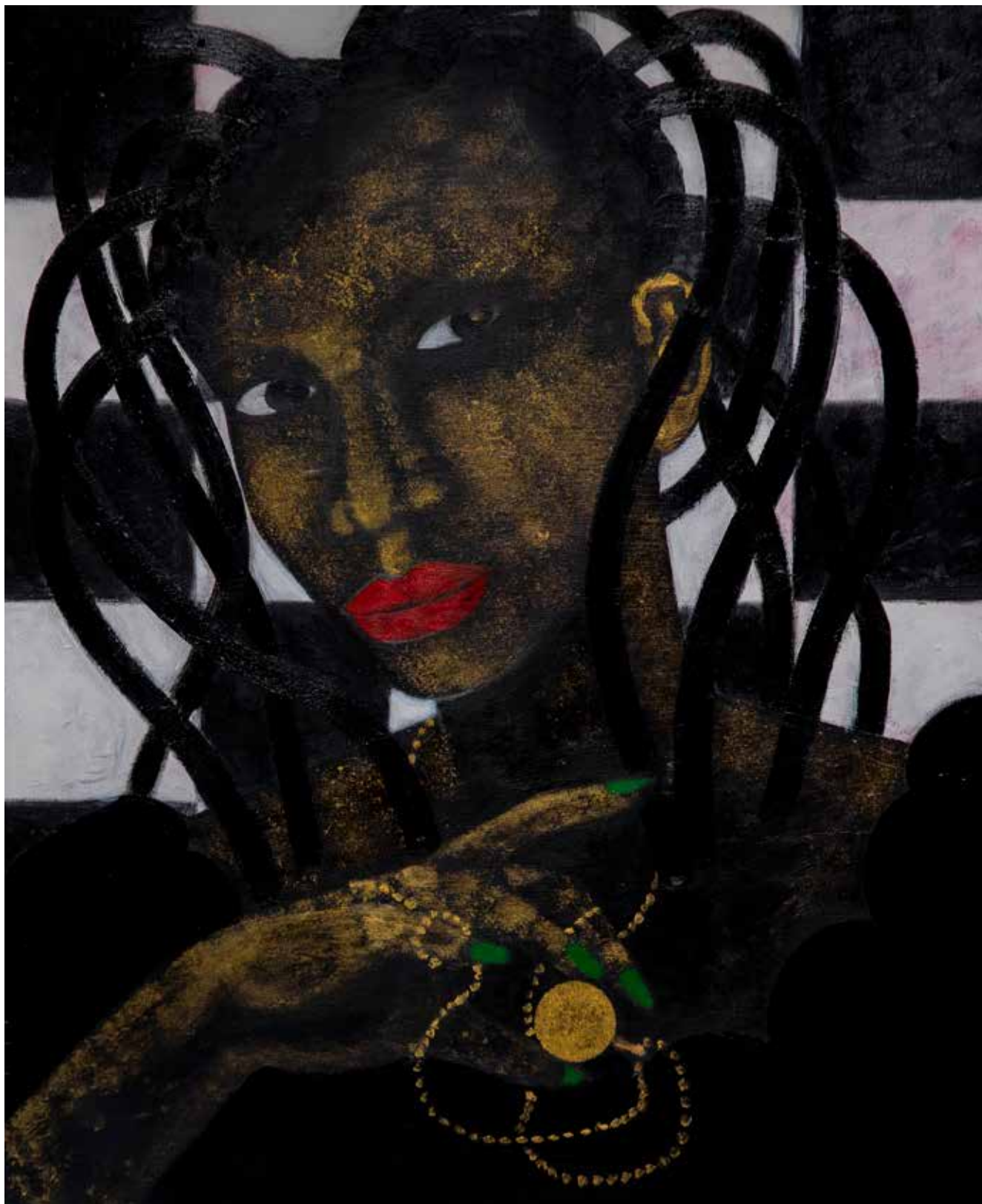
66 x 47 cm



Spitting Fires, 2023

Acrylic on Ply

53.7 x 53.7 cm



You And Whose Army, 2023

Acrylic on Ply

50.6 x 61.6 cm

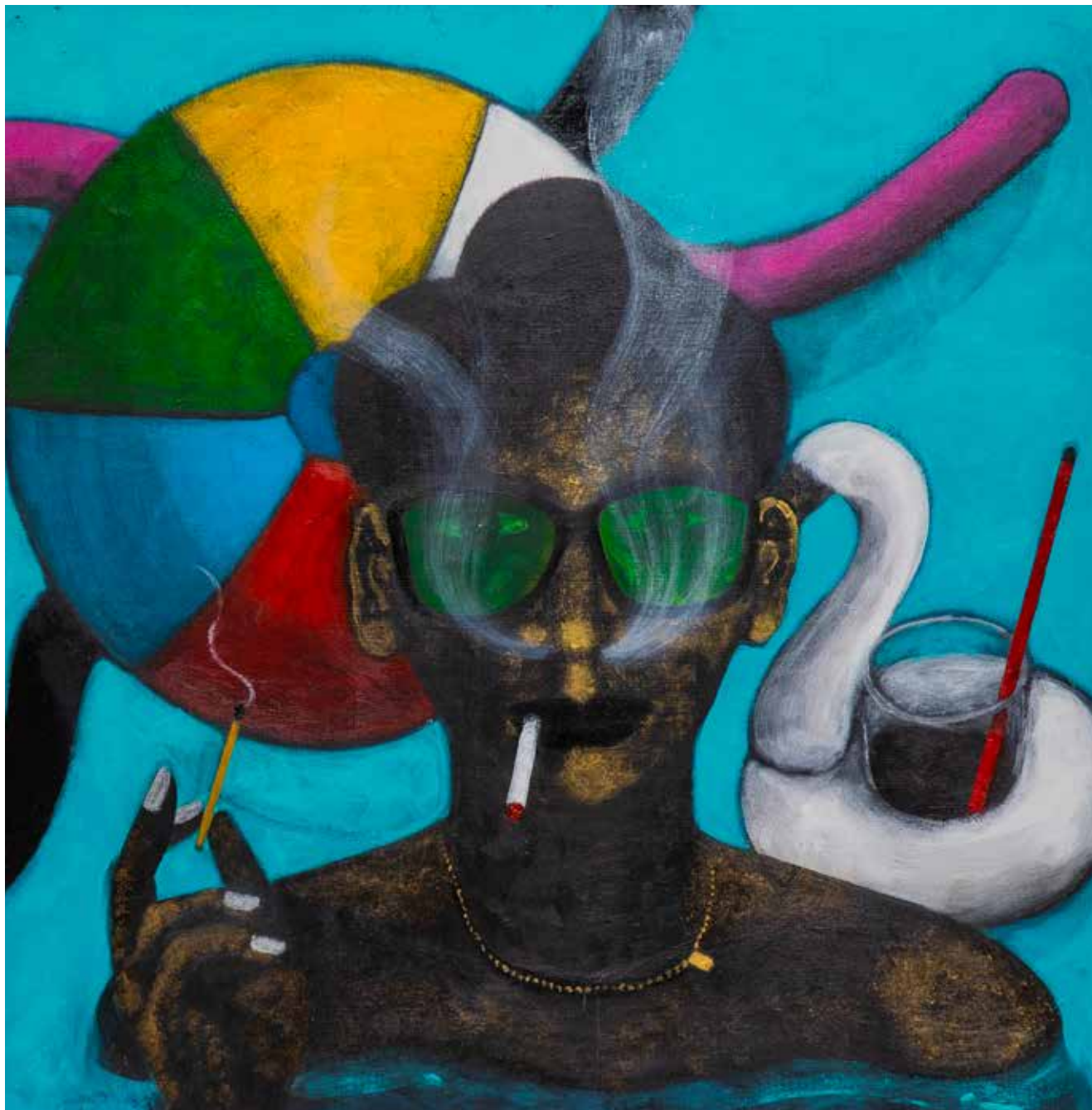


A Bird in Hand, 2023

Acrylic on Ply
65.5 x 66.5 cm

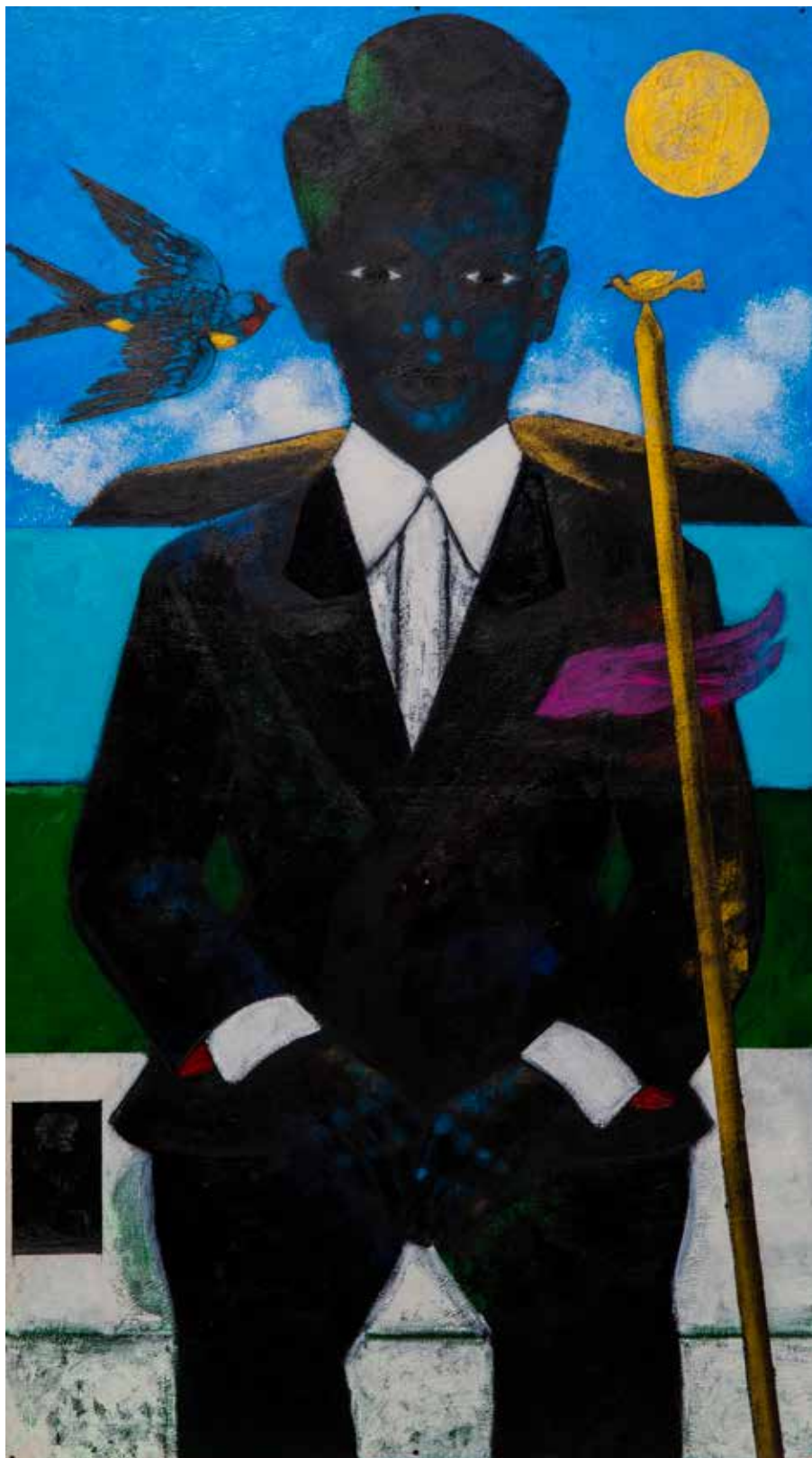


A cut above, 2023
Acrylic on Ply
59 x 72.5 cm



Return to Palm Springs, 2022

Acrylic on ply
65.1 x 65.1 cm



The Translator, 2023

Acrylic on Ply

53.2 x 89 cm



Oath, 2023
Acrylic on Ply
68 x 109.6 cm



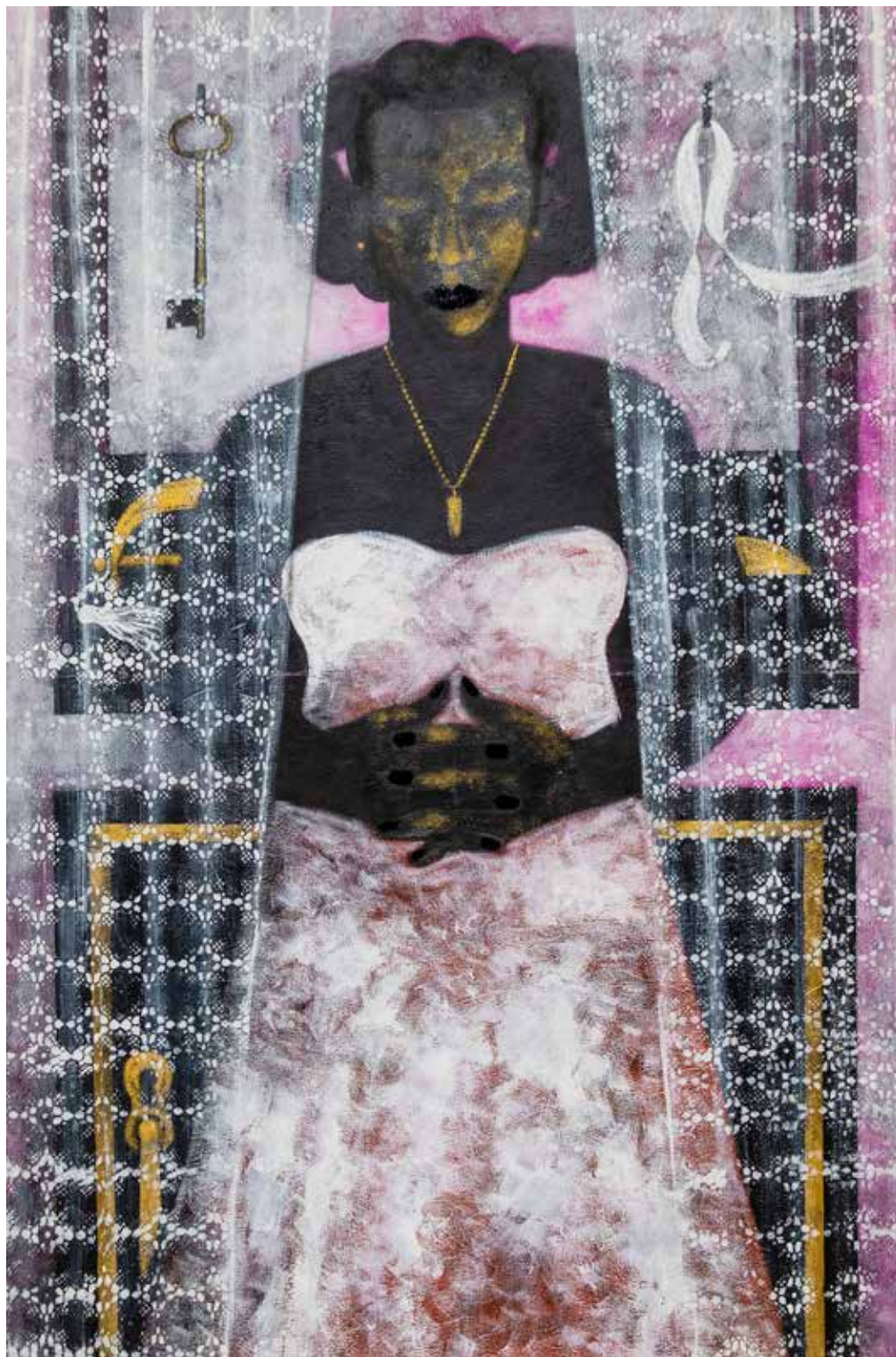
Seer, 2022-23
Acrylic on Ply
55.1 x 122.6 cm



Golden Boy Intercepts The Darts Of Malice, 2022-23

Acrylic on Ply

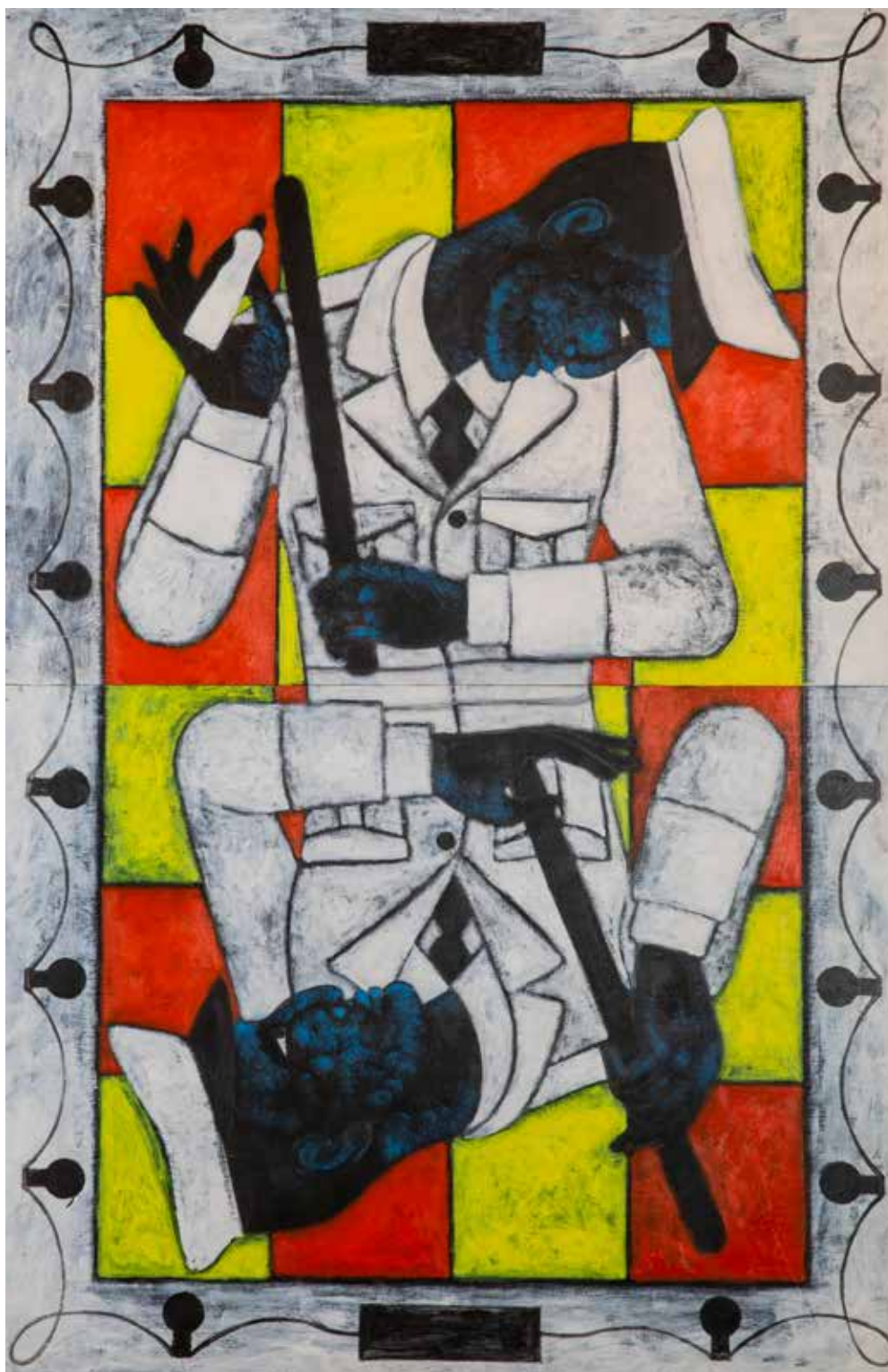
86.7 x 127.7 cm



Victoria's Secret, 2022

Acrylic on Ply

81.6 x 122.6 cm



Good Cop / Bad Cop, 2019

Acrylic on Ply

86.7 x 127.7 cm



Speak Softly And Carry A Big Stick, 2023

Acrylic on Ply

86.7 x 127.7 cm



Riding High, 2022-23
Acrylic on Ply
57.6 x 184.6 cm



Hot Seat, 2021
Acrylic on Ply
127.7 x 127.7 cm



The Vexilographer, 2022
Acrylic on Ply
127.7 x 127.7 cm



The Funambulist, 2023
Acrylic on Ply
127.7 x 127.7 cm

Abe Odedina: Walk Like a Champion

*Walk like a champion
Talk like a champion
What a piece of body gal
A where you get it from?
Knock 'pon your entrance
Ram pa pa pam pam
Gal let me in, wha!*

In celebrated reggae star Buju Banton's beloved 1995 song *Champion* – a tribute to the beauty and moreover confidence and self-assurance of women – he asks, 'A where you get it from?' And for painter Abe Odedina, the answer will always be: he got it from his Mother.

This exhibition is in honour of Otunba Rosalind Morolayo Odedina. It's about the inheritance of grace. It's about being drip-fed the importance of discretion and intention whilst being told you are beautiful. *Walk Like a Champion* is a homegoing presentation about being true to yourself, gathering the people you care for, and emphasising the ideas you triumph. It is a thank you, a love letter, a celebration.

- Katherine Finerty

About O'DA

O'DA Art is a Contemporary Art organisation based in Lagos, Nigeria. Established in 2021, we specialise in the work of Contemporary Art & Design from across the African continent and its diaspora.

Bridging the gap between local and international audiences, our gallery is committed to championing mid-career and established artists, whilst celebrating multi-faceted designers who explore a wide range of themes such as; identity, technology, political commentary, social consciousness and environmental change.

With "serenity" at the epicentre of our gallery vision, we strive to showcase engaging exhibitions by fusing art and interior design to create an immersive environment for our audiences. With a continuous programme of sublime exhibitions, installations and performances, the gallery aims to foster global partnerships, expand a gallery residency programme and welcome art connoisseurs to contemporary West African art

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O'DA

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