

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: IMA-ABASI OKON

Infinite Slippage: nonRepugnant InsolvenCies

T!-a!-r!-r!-y!-i!-n!-g! as Hand Claps of M's

Hard'Loved'Flesh

[I'M irreducibly-undone because]

—Quantum Leverage-Complex-Dub

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Ellen Greig: *I thought a good place to start would be to talk about your approach to what you have described as “exhibition -making as a form of syntax”, which is often reflected in the wordplay of your titling. For example, your title for your new commission here at Chisenhale Gallery is: Infinite Slippage: nonRepugnant InsolvenCies T!-a!-r!-r!-y!-i!-n!-g! as Hand Claps of M's Hard'Loved'Flesh [I'M irreducibly-undone because] —Quantum Leverage-Complex-Dub.*

Ima-Abasi Okon: My use of syntax in my work is fleshing out a language that is appropriate for my gait. I like to have a structure that is able to contain everything that I'm thinking about, and everything I am thinking about in that moment. I see my use of titling, as well as my approach to making work, reflective of this process. I don't just turn up as an artist, and whatever that identity may mean, I turn up with all the other aspects of who I am, or who I am attempting to be. I'm working through this all at the same time. There are all these other factors that contribute to how I approach making work: did I wake up ok? Did I floss this morning? I think for a long time I considered the 'proper' way of acting in a professionalised context was to edit certain traits of myself. There is an idea that some actions or feelings are 'proper' for a particular context and some of these things are not. I actually want to do away with that preconception of what a certain professional space warrants of me, because I don't find it helpful.

I am also preoccupied with the role the titles play in 'understanding' the work. The other day you said my title for this exhibition is like a riddle, like a series of clues, and that's one way to think about them. On the surface they may appear opaque, but there are individuals to whom some of the contents of the title will feel like a confidentiality breach. I would insist that the titles are extremely generous if you sit with them. But it requires the viewer to do some work.

In my work I don't want to only concentrate on one concern, so I want to reflect this in some way through the titling. All of these words, and how they are expressed, are equally important, there's no hierarchy. They all arrive at the same speed, like twenty darts coming towards you at the same time. I am also thinking about rhythm, about pace, prophesy as well as some other things that I am not prepared to give away.

EG: *Putting it all into a pot.*

IAO: Basically, like one massive stew. Also, I am riffing off a practice in philosophy, the way that theorists coin new terms to frame ideas. Because I genuinely feel a dissonance between my experience, and the apparatus that I have been given to communicate verbally.

EG: *I'm interested in the use and inclusion of the word 'tarrying' in the title for your exhibition, as well as the use of punctuation when spelling the word. It invites you to read the word in a certain way – both excited, and slow or disjointed.*

IAO: Tarrying is an important part of this new body of work. Tarrying in terms of a stilled intensity of waiting, of slowing down. An intended dwelling on something, or the waiting for something to arrive. Through both the work in the exhibition and through this simple wordplay, I'm trying to make a place palpable for something else. I don't know whether I've made this work for the living or for the dead.

I use punctuation to complicate how language is read and in turn show up the incompetency in its structure to be a total representational device. For example, when we see an exclamation mark, we know that the sentence is said with emphasis or there is some shock or excitement around it. Or, with a comma, it is supposed to be a break in speech, a pause. I understand punctuation as a system to illuminate meaning. Typographically if we sit with the 14 punctuation marks commonly used within the English grammar system, they can also phonetically map an individual's rhythm. The rule in place for their usage doesn't work, or can't describe all rhythms, without a certain level of oppression or violence. Everyone has a unique rhythm. Sometimes I stutter and sometimes it takes me a while, I might say one word and there is a massive pause, and so I need twenty commas after that. I want to map that for myself. What does that communication look like specifically to me? Why do I have to wrap that around a grammar which is inadequate? And certainly, why should I continue to subscribe to one that is so?

EG: What about communication that is not tied to spoken or written language, but is more bodily or visual?

IAO: They are also of importance. There is a concentrated effort to increase my proficiency in bodily communication. A praxis that is not only built on this, but privileges different faculties in the process of locating knowledge. This has also been informed through my role teaching on a university course and having to facilitate a variety of visual languages. My starting point with the students is that we're attempting to firm up is another language for them to speak, which is exclusively set by them mentally emotionally and physically. How do you allow everyone to turn up in their default? Without any kind of exterior influence? And craft communication from there?

EG: An unlearning semiotics?

IAO: Totally. Some of the students arrive and they say, "Hey, this is how we're supposed to be, this is what design is supposed to look like" yet those decisions don't belong to them, in that they haven't arrived at these conclusions through a period of their own study, but by a policy which then goes on to produce a culture. It needs debunking. In all spheres. What does it actually look like to you? What does it sound like? What does it feel like? How does it taste? Let's go about mapping that.

EG: Can you tell me about the inclusion of the works you have made with oriented strand board, painted with varnish and framed with various 'exotic woods'?

IAO: They belong to an ongoing series that I currently refer to as *Mahalia Jackson*. They're reoccurring, and always preform in the same way. They provide hope, and speak about aspiration, but mainly hope. As a comma on the baseline, or as an apostrophe marking a relationship of possession. Whenever Mahalia is referenced in the title, know that there's a conjuring of hope and at least one of these will be present. Go and sit with Mahalia, everything you need to know about how these works operate or attempt to, is with her. She's exceptional. Beyond actually. As for their inclusion, hope is a technology that makes things visible. I am trying to ride on that. Grease the tarrying wheels.

EG: We have installed a temporary ceiling across part of the gallery space. The ceiling is made with a modular design that is commonly found in administrative spaces – from waiting rooms to retail spaces, to doctors' rooms and offices.

IAO: I have used a modular ceiling design for a few reasons. One being that the very nature of the design always creates an excess and produces division within the original architectural structure that houses it. Another, is that it's become a ubiquitous aesthetic in institutional places of waiting, processing, being processed, policy manufacturing, administration and the like, in which the outcomes of some of these can and have been nefarious.

This work comprises 363 tiles and we have partially lowered the ceiling of the gallery. It's high enough to walk under, but low enough to feel a little oppressive. I am cautious not to be reductive with this analogy, but it is important. It's a

formal and conceptual language. And one that can be felt. This space might refer to walking into Human Resources at work, because of an unpaid invoice, and so on.

My interest also lies in the space above it that is hidden. Negated and concluded as being unnecessary, excessive to the requirement. I am thinking about this as a proxy for what I've talked about before – people who live in social death and are eliminated from the category of the human; those who are marginalised and kept on the periphery. A zone of banishment. I'm interested in that zone. It is rich with knowledges that aren't caught up in normalised disciplinary boundaries, despite how the dominant structures or 'world-making-project' have labelled this zone. Since the end of the Earth is being actualised, we need to tarry here in this zone. The 'world-making project' has tried to make the end of the Earth quotidian for those in that zone... Despite this, strategies are already in place to exist and to live and thrive *in-spite-of* these conditions. I like to think it's because there's a bodily understanding of the difference between the construct of the world and the actuality of the Earth, which generates joy and a generative space to 'thrive-in-spite-of'. This is the type of surplus I am interested in and thinking through.

For example, how do you get up in the morning with all the shit that you're dealing with? You are still pausing to acknowledge a sweet 16th birthday –in-spite-of, you're still loving on one another—in-spite-of, cooking for others and performing hospitality—in-spite-of. If those 'world-making' folk can just get over the policy they have in place for how certain bodies look, sound, move, eat and run a whole knowledge opens up. That is what the world needs. Not even the world, forget the world, because as I have pointed out, the idea of the world is a construct, but the Earth needs it, and we see that. That's a very real thing especially now.

That is why I like the Television programme *Derry Girls*, which is set in Northern Ireland. Here, the conflict in life, or violence in their life, is somewhat arbitrary, it's not the main focus – it is what happens in the background. These individuals are still finding out about the tingles in their body or lambasting the arrival of a pimple in the morning. I really enjoyed the fact that these normal life scenarios have been foregrounded and not to be erased or moved from view in replace of narratives around struggle, of which they are also experiencing. They can exist side by side. Unfortunately, time and time again, you become defined by the trauma and this is the only way for you to be engaged. The elasticity on skin is incredible. Once the need to stretch has gone, it goes back to normal. Anyway, that's why I think that *Derry Girls* is great because it doesn't do that.

EG: Embedded into the ceiling are hand-made glass light shades, each individually cut with a design. You've filled these glass lights with a mixture of palm oil and Courvoisier VS Cognac.

IAO: These glass lampshades are opulent, delicate and you wouldn't necessarily find them installed within this type of ceiling. I am interested in making this clinical, lowered ceiling space, which physically bears on the body, richer. How do you exist and operate in a space that is structurally life limiting? You can hack it. There's a lot of 'fixing to use' (to use a friend and collaborator, Taylor Le Melle's term) going on in this exhibition. How to 'fix to use' a situation or topic or feeling that's being projected onto me externally, or that I am being forced into, into a scenario that works for me? Again, how do I live in this in spite of that? These lights also become hosts for a mixture of palm oil and Courvoisier VS Cognac and I have installed them in pairs, hung closely together.

EG: The glass shades and the ceiling tiles represent very different approaches to production processes and material value. Why have you used these two materials?

IAO: For me, it's important that the production of both the ceiling and the lights are the antithesis of one another. I'm interested in the tension between the production process of the mass-produced ceiling tiles and structure, against the lampshades which have been individually made and crafted by two different fabricators based in the West Midlands who have been working with this craft for decades. Reg, who cut the glass, chose each design and went for it and they are amazing. And let's not forget Alister! He hand-blew the glass structures, so they are all slightly different shapes and sizes.

The glass is more autobiographical. The style in which the lights have been designed takes influence from glass decanters. It is a material I think through in terms of socialising, but was also used as an indicator of wealth. The sociality around them, comes from my dad. It is about entertainment. Radical Anticipatory Hospitality. My parents have a more social life than I do. They have an impulse to entertain, to greet, to host. Sitting at the table and communing with someone or getting into conversation and laughter. That is what those represent for me. These types of decanters are normally sold with two glasses. So, it is not an individual endeavour, of course you can sit down and drink by yourself, but it's really about being together. That's how I arrived at this as a material, actually. All the other stuff about class, about production, about quality, about taste came after, the more I sat with it.

EG: That's why you became specifically interested in working with glass blowing and cutting, which is a dying craft.

IAO: Totally. Reg, the glass cutter, has invested so much into it. He did this for thirty, thirty-five years. He has this skill set which is no longer wanted or desired in the same way that it once was. He can produce maybe 20 of these cut glass objects a day. Which he used as a selling point when I first met him. That's the totality of his skill, its relation to the demand. But now we don't need 20 a day, yet he still has the muscle memory to do that. I find that really interesting. I am also interested in why this style of design is no longer desirable or valuable.

EG: Let's go back to what you were talking about earlier in relation to spells. On the ceiling panels you have smeared an invisible layer of ultrasound gel, insulin and morphine that has been mixed together with some of your mum's gold jewellery.

IAO: These materials need to go into the space before me... For example, if I'm going to be hosted by Chisenhale Gallery or another institute, this gesture of applying the liquid prepares the area for me to come in. What do I need to prepare to take up this offer? What do I need as an artist that's also taking on a particular set of optics? What do I need to take up this offer so that I can enjoy it and thrive in it? If either of those things are possible?

These medical liquids, ultrasound gel, insulin and morphine also temper the body – they all have an effect on the body. I am interested in how the idea of a body can be applied to different objects and materials. And in doing so, represent a body that's not here.

In this exhibition I'm trying to avoid figurative representation in the traditional sense. How do I constitute a body without allowing it to be a spectacle, without allowing it to be consumed in a particular way? Because again, those conditions are not present. I don't know when they are going to be right. Until that happens then, I don't want to make a spectacle of anything.

EG: For me, the body is also implicated within the sound installation within the space. You have installed 11 air conditioners on one of the gallery walls, and these fans host a new sound work titled alongside-ness with-out identification1 + excess over the original value1 < (A-----d-----o-----r-----n). Could you talk about this installation?

IAO: I think about air conditioners as cyclical systems that not only affect an atmosphere but are containers that have the potential to hold, give and receive. This comes down to breath. What happens when someone's breath is obstructed or someone's capacity to breathe is obstructed, limited, or is policed. To be out of breath is a much broader conversation and can be used as an analytic of value extraction under capitalism.

Each fan is programmed to perform at different speeds, or durations and they run continuously on a loop. I worked with Jack James to make the programme and mix the sound. The contents of the air conditioners have been gutted and only the fan has been left. Six of the fans host the sound work, which plays out, through the moving fan. Every moment, depending on where you are in the space, you might feel like a light touch of air, like you're touched by

something. So, there's also this play in terms of where the body is and what body is being privileged. And I want to privilege and make people notice this space above the ceiling.

EG: The sound work can be heard throughout the entire gallery space, but is projected to this 'surplus' space above the ceiling. Your previous works have also used the vent as a host for sound. What is your interest in sound specifically?

IAO: I think that a lot of our issues are because there has been an overdetermination of the world through sight. I think that's number one. Not only has it been overdetermined through sight it has been overdetermined from a humanistic point of view. Recalling that 'human' often doesn't mean everyone. Sound does this other thing, it's another technology that allows perception in a different way, certainly with more affect. More feeling.

EG: It asks you to pay attention.

IAO: My interest in sound and why I am moving away from representations of the figure or moving away from an image in terms of the photographic, is because I feel the photographic is locked in this particular place, it's imbued with anthropological and ethnographical hang-ups. It's jurisdictional of someone's understanding of an extremely biased mode of what I was talking about earlier in regards to what is seen as 'proper.' An example of the problem with the image is the numerous instances of documented, police brutality that have yielded zero consequence in 'democratic spaces' of justice. Something happens to that document that causes it not to be seen by everyone in the same way. To me it's just performing an ancestral trait. The photograph is also a retrospective gesture. The education system will have you believe that some races don't have a history.

So, what is the new, more equitable format for representation? For me, sound hasn't been owned or claimed in a way that the photographic has, politically, institutionally. Yes, there are industries around it if we think about music. But I don't think it's been claimed in one way to marginalise one group of people over another. Which I think the photographic has. Though there are municipal attempts to do so, under noise control, but that's a very recent history in comparison.

EG: What is the sound that we are hearing through the air conditioners?

IAO: I've slowed down a re-mixed version of *Adorn* by Miguel. Since a friend played me a chopped and screwed version of the original, I've been obsessed with it. I listened to it on repeat, for days. I really like this idea of how two versions of the same song can be released and what that brings up about copyright and originality. *Adorn* is a track that everyone knows about – it's not underground. But, then someone else puts another version of it out at the same time. The audience for that new version might be completely different from the audience for the original version, of course with overlaps. I am interested in this system of distribution.

I also started looking into the ecology around this process of slowing down pre-existing tracks, as well as talking to my brother about this process and thinking through what this means politically – to slow down. What does it mean to slow things down? And slowing down as a form of opting out. Also thinking about what does it mean to be 'slow', the connotations with that and its relationship to ableism, and laziness. Which effects how you are then moved through a system that desires to extract a type of labour from you. Again, circling back to strategies it could be argued that a reclamation project is underway; asserting a right to insolvency in the way theorist, 'Bifo' Berardi talks about how actually, let's use laziness and stillness and not produce as a way to resist the structure that we're in. Like, "hey you over there have a predilection to be lazy!" Nope, I am just not going to produce in the way you think I should/can produce.

EG: Let's call it Capitalism.

IAO: Let's call it what it is, right? It needs to be slowed all the way down. The sound work represents a moment of respite, of stillness.

EG: Do we need to be making room to tarry?

IAO: Yeah. I think slowing down is productive. I hope that with this exhibition we are creating a generative space... The word 'productive' has been claimed too much by the exploitive nature of Capitalism, so we need to look at another term, like generative. It could be a feeling or a smile, it's the small things as well as the big things. It's not that we're producing this or that, it could be more invisible. It could be healing or just making you feel good. That's generative.

Interviewed by Ellen Greig, Curator: Commissions, Chisenhale Gallery, on Friday 21 June 2019 at Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.