

Aspen Art Museum
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Educator Notes



Chris Ofili, *Afro Red Web*, 2002–03. © Chris Ofili. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London

Chris Ofili: Night and Day

July 17–October 18, 2015

About the artist

Chris Ofili was born in 1968 and grew up in Manchester, England. His family is of Nigerian descent, and the artist now lives in Trinidad. In 1992, he went on a trip to Zimbabwe and returned full of inspiration from the music, culture, and art that he found there. Over the last twenty years, Chris Ofili has explored lots of different materials, styles, and stories through his work. His exhibition invites us to take a journey with our imaginations and experience the different feelings that his work inspires.

About the exhibition

Chris Ofili: Night and Day is the first survey exhibition in the US of the work of acclaimed British artist Chris Ofili. Emerging in London in the early 1990s, Ofili gained recognition for his adventurous experimentation with material as well as his deep, critical engagement with painting. Inspired by diverse sources—such as the Bible, nineties hip-hop, Zimbabwean cave paintings, Blaxploitation films, and the works of William Blake—the artist evokes a variety of environments in his work, including mythic landscapes, the streets of contemporary England, and the verdant terrain of Trinidad, where he has lived since 2005.

Throughout his prolific career, Ofili's practice has undergone various shifts, as the exhibition title suggests—changing not only his subject matter, but also his technique and style. The AAM's presentation of *Night and Day* encompasses five galleries over three levels of the museum, showcasing the artist's paintings, drawings, and sculpture alongside new work created specifically for Aspen. Exploring the potential of figurative painting to address social, political, and personal experiences, *Night and Day* is also a reminder of art's ability to question stereotypes, promote discussion, and ultimately, create change.

Gallery 1

In 2012, Ofili was invited by London's National Gallery and the Royal Ballet to respond to works that the Renaissance painter Titian created based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. His works loosely center around the story of the goddess Diana who, surprised by the hunter Actaeon while bathing, turns him into a stag. Alongside the Ovid paintings are a number of recent works similarly animated by unfamiliar characters, outlandish landscapes, and folkloric myths.

Gallery 2

Ofili's works from the nineties were created using his hallmark materials, including paint, resin, glitter, collage, and elephant dung—a material he first became interested in and began collecting during an art study trip to Zimbabwe in 1992.

These canvases from early in Ofili's artistic career combine psychedelic surfaces with provocative imagery. Ofili portrays a cast of characters that includes religious figures, historical, political and cultural icons, and imaginary heroes. These powerful works eventually led to Ofili being awarded the Turner Prize in 1998.

Gallery 3

The series of red, black, and green paintings, begun in 2000, were displayed in the British Pavilion at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003, when Ofili represented Great Britain. Ofili chose a limited color palette based on the Pan-African flag designed by political leader Marcus Garvey in the 1920s for his Universal Negro Improvement Association. These colors were also important to the Civil Rights and the Black Liberation Movements of the 1960s and continue to resonate today. The red in the flag symbolized the bloodshed for freedom,

black represented skin color, and green stood for Africa's natural resources.

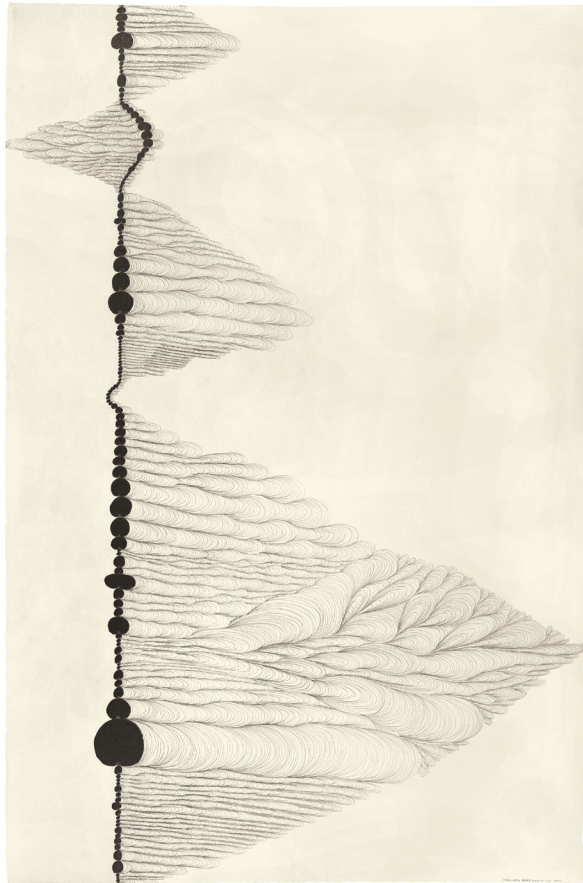
Ofili began the intimate graphite drawings of his *Afro Margin* series as meditative exercises at home in 2004. Within each drawing are tiny "Afro heads," small faces surrounded by large Afros.

Gallery 5

Following his move from London to Trinidad, Ofili became fascinated by the landscape of his new Caribbean home as well as the way in which the light transforms as day transitions to night. In response, he began a new series of blue paintings that only become visible when the viewer spends time patiently observing the artworks.

Gallery 6

Created over a ten-year period (1995–2005), the watercolor series *Afromuses* portrays men and women that perhaps are the imagined cast of characters that we also see in the artist's large-scale paintings. Ofili uses watercolor to make these small paintings, working quickly and with an element of chance as the pigment spreads unpredictably. Some of these figures are "couples," identified by their matching attire, while others stand alone.



Chris Ofili, *Afro Margin Two*, 2004. © Chris Ofili. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York/London



Chris Ofili, *Afromuses (Couple)*, 1995–2005. © Chris Ofili. Courtesy the artist, David Zwirner, New York, and Victoria Miro, London

Questions for discussion

- 1 Chris Ofili creates artworks with many layers—both by building up various materials upon the canvas as well as making reference to different ideas and meanings. What layers can you uncover in your life?
- 1 Look closely at one of the *Afro Margin* drawings. If the lines were musical notes, what kind of sound do you think they would make? How would you create your own lines that look like sound?
- 1 Look closely at the two people in the painting *Afro Red Web*. Who are they? What's happening now? What might happen next?

For more information, please contact the Education Department at 970.925.8050 ext. 133 or email education@aspenartmuseum.org

Chris Ofili: Night and Day has been organized by the New Museum, New York. This exhibition was made possible by Mitzi and Warren Eisenberg, Susan and Leonard Feinstein, Lietta and Dakis Joannou, Beth Swofford, David Teiger, and an anonymous donor. Special thanks to David Zwirner, New York/London, and Victoria Miro, London. The accompanying catalogue, published by Rizzoli, is made possible by the J. McSweeney and G. Mills Publications Fund at the New Museum.

The exhibition at the New Museum was curated by Massimiliano Gioni, Artistic Director; Gary Carrion-Murayari, Kraus Family Curator; and Margot Norton, Associate Curator. In Aspen, the exhibition is overseen by Heidi Zuckerman, Nancy and Bob Magoon CEO and Director.

The presentation of *Night and Day* in Aspen is supported by Katie and Amnon Rodan, and funded in part by the AAM National Council. Additional exhibition support is provided by the Good Works Foundation and Laura Donnelley, Devon Dikeou and Fernando Troya, and Liz and Eric Lefkofsky.

AAM education programs are made possible by the Questrom Education Fund.

Suggested activities

Powerful portraits

From 1995–2005, Ofili created a number of small paintings of imagined figures he calls *Afromuses*, referencing the muse as a source of inspiration. Have students discuss in pairs who they consider a muse in their lives. How does this person inspire them?

Give students a small piece of watercolor paper, either a full sheet or a half size. Invite them to create a portrait of their muse using their memory of this person, starting first with a sketch in pencil. Finish the artwork by using watercolor paint, inviting students to see if they can achieve the swirling blend of colors that can be found in Ofili's *Afromuses*.

Outlandish landscapes

Show students an image of *Afro Red Web*. After having a conversation about who the figures are in this painting, turn to the setting. What can they notice about the background? Where do they think this artwork takes place?

Have students discuss a natural landscape they want to visit. Invite them to create this real or imagined place by creating multilayered artworks upon a canvas board or found material such as cardboard.

Like many of Ofili's earlier works, *Afro Red Web* uses paint, resin, glitter, and other materials. Gather a range of materials for students to be able to experiment with layers and textures. When their artworks are finished, have them create a story about this place and what it would feel like to visit.