

ADELA

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Sakhile&Me®

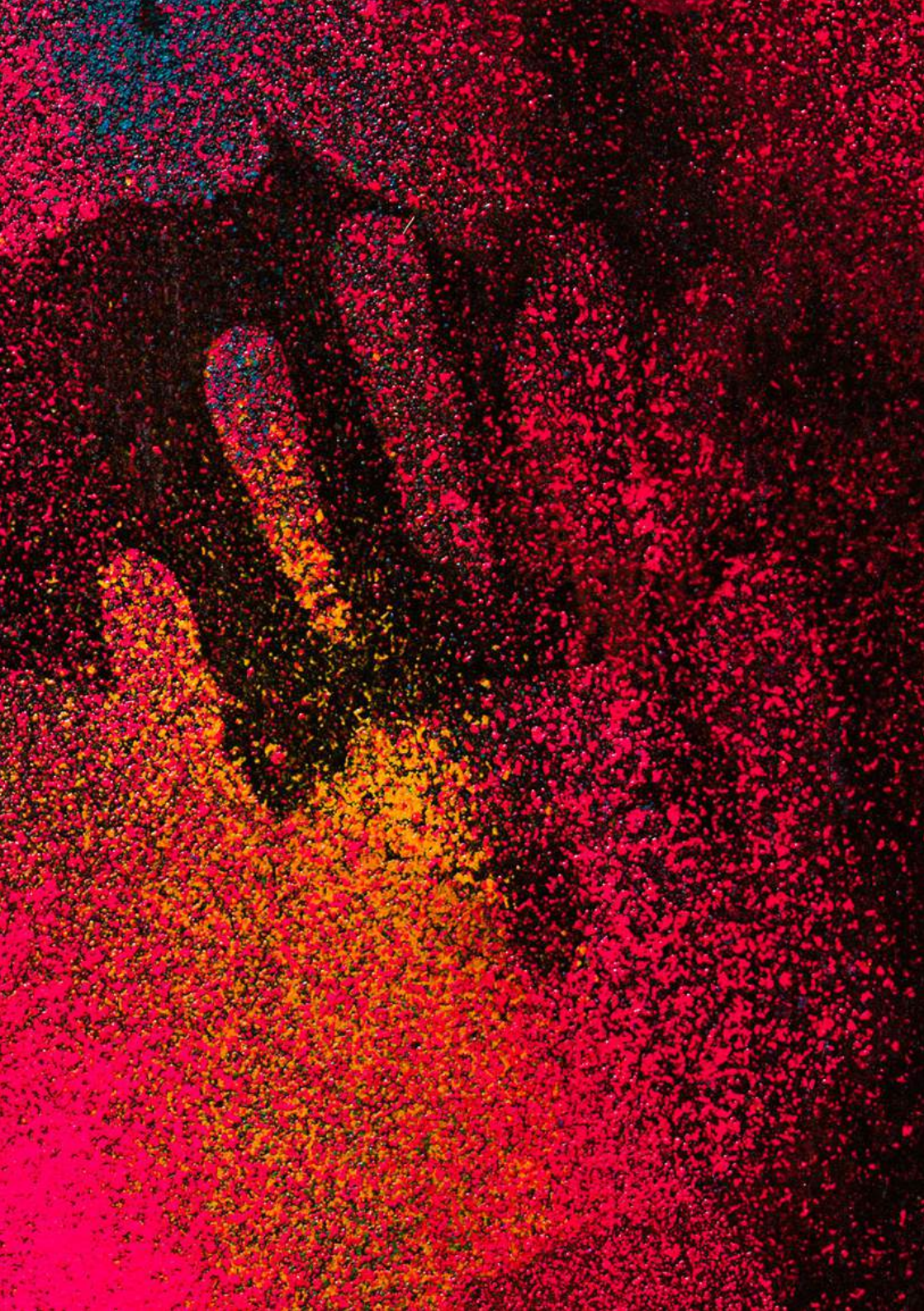
Exhibition Space for
International Contemporary Art

ADELAIDE DAMOAH
RADICAL JOY

Published by Sakhile Matlhare and Daniel Hagemeyer
with texts by Dr. Marie-Anne Mancio and Péjú Oshin



*Detail of Moon Cycle, Period, Full Moon. This
Week, I Have Simultaneously Experienced
Intense Pleasure and Excruciating Pain (2021)*



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*Installation view of Moon Cycle,
Period, Full Moon: This Week, I Have
Simultaneously Experienced Intense
Pleasure and Excruciating Pain (2021)*

PÉJÚ OSHIN

But First, We Must Cleanse Our Palates

What will we eat today that we haven't eaten before?

How might we be fed in a way that engages not just the palate but activates all five senses to heighten an immense and imminent pleasure – one which we have denied ourselves for

so long whilst watching others revel the fullest spectrum of emotion possible, whilst settling for a much quieter, less tasty, and cheap thrill?

Each Adelaide Damoah work is akin to the satisfaction felt when

Péjú Oshin is a British-Nigerian curator, writer, and educator based in London. Her work explores liminality in culture, identity, and the built environment through working with artists, archives, and cultural artefacts to create and further explore shared experiences across a global African diaspora.

Péjú has a history of supporting young and emerging artists and cultural producers through her work at Tate, The Barbican and the Wellcome Trust, and others. She is an Associate Lecturer at Central Saint Martins, having taught on courses in the Fashion and Culture & Enterprise departments. She is the author of *Between Words & Space* (2021), a collection of poetry and prose, and was shortlisted for the *Forbes* "30 Under 30 Europe" list in the "Arts & Culture" category in 2021.

Péjú currently works at Tate as a Curator for Young People's Programmes. She is co-chair of Tate's BAME network and Chair of the Trustees of Peckham Platform.

remembering a wholesome meal. The taste and the feelings that return to you periodically, during the middle of the day, whilst eating something mundane to keep you going or in the quiet of the night when you can't sleep and the moon shines fully, gazing at you through the delicate lace that covers your window, reminding you that joy does exist and that you have experienced it.

There is much that food offers us. Aside from its nutritional qualities, food is a point of social and cultural and even spiritual connection – through its absence and the act of fasting. The act of abstaining or denying oneself tangible food in favor of achieving a heightened spiritual clarity. A clarity that enables us to look deeper within and tell ourselves the truth about who we are and who we hope to be. Let us explore the

concept of denial, which is often at the forefront of the Black experience. We have, historically, and still till this present moment, experienced the denial of equality, opportunities, being believed, rest, the ability to be angry without fear of it being weaponized as a threat, joy without limits, and a pleasure that is for our gaze and our gaze alone. For our suffering has become a delectable meal for others whilst poisoning us slowly and without mercy.

There is often a pressure for Black artists to create work that centers on themes of pain, suffering, and trauma – and it is not to say that this is not part of the human experience, but this expectation to produce such work, constantly, can rob them and us of the tenderness that they deserve to feel.

As an artist from the African diaspora, there is an inherent complexity



Moonlit Power (2021); Pigment and ink on canvas; 190 x 200 cm

within Damoah's work. The reconciling of the histories that exist within her and are retold and relived in the context of harsh climates. Western shores that politicize her body to affirm it as radical, thus stripping it of the joy that it harbors. Her body as the physical manifestation of

the collection of essays, edited by Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande, *To Exist Is to Resist* (2019). As a black woman to be in a position, such as Damoah, where she is experiencing pleasure through her own body, is an act of resistance in itself. An act of radical joy.

Her body as griot, as stylus, as paintbrush.

The colors used in this body of work differ from Damoah's usual choice of reds, blues, and gold, which speak to various points of reference. The joy that she derives from hues of blue seen in the works of artists such as Lisa Brice and Yves Klein and are calming and cool like a tall glass of water to reds, which run and trigger images of blood and the violent legacies of colonialism, to the gold that speaks to the rich history of the Gold Coast, Ghana, her country of origin. Instead, we are embraced by an exciting array of juicy colors that you can almost certainly taste, hear, and feel. A palette reminiscent of sherbet sweets – hot and coral pinks that Damoah delighted over as a child, citrus yellow and lime greens. Sweets that are synonymous with a joy that is pure and untainted

as they are rooted in a childlike desire, a childish pleasure, which is free and capable of surrender. Desires that, as adults, we deny ourselves of as there is much that dictates what we can and what we can't have. Things that we know we are 'not supposed to have' but crave and so grant them in low quantities and in secret.

Damoah's paintings offer a level of intimacy – the repetition of hands through the work feels like her offer to hold us whilst simultaneously beckoning us to take pause and look at how it is that we hold ourselves – and a level of care that cannot be found in external sources as it is harbored deep within us. It is us. The poetic nature of the works offer an insight into Damoah's writing practice, which is deeply personal and so emerges through these nuggets that remind of Nikki Giovanni's "A Poem on Friendship":

*We are not lovers
because of the love
we make
but the love
we have*

*We are not friends
because of the laughs
we spend
but the tears we save*

*I don't want to be near you
for the thoughts we share
but the words we never have
to speak*

*I will never miss you
because of what we do
but what we are
together*

Nikki Giovanni
"A Poem on Friendship"

Each line as a statement of fact, but when together a narrative that tells of our hopes to preserve intimacy. A baring of her soul which is often heavy due to the responsibility of feeding everyone else. What we feed ourselves spiritually and emotionally is just as important as the physical.

These works serve as an amuse bouche to help us make sense of the contradiction that life is. Can we change our diet without guilt? A reminder

that without experiencing pain, we cannot possibly know what pleasure is and that pleasure can and does exist beyond the erotic. A prompt to live fully and an outward declaration of visibility asking us not to ignore ourselves. Take this as an invitation to explore all that we suppress in the name of that which has been projected on to us, and so does not belong here. Listen to yourself and surrender to demands of your mind, body, and soul.



It's 3 a.m. and One of the Most Intense,
Spiritual, Divinely Feminine, Creative,
Sexual Experiences Just Happened in
My Brain While I Slept off the Pain (2021);
Pigment on canvas; 153 x 102 cm

DR. MARIE-ANNE MANCIO

Conjuring Rainbows from Her Own Clouds

Two beginnings.

Adelaide Damoah awaking from an intensely sexual dream at the same time as experiencing excruciating pains due to endometriosis. Or, as per the title of one of her works: *It's 3 a.m. and One of the Most Intense, Spiritual, Divinely Feminine, Creative, Sexual Experiences Just Happened in My Brain While I Slept off the Pain* (pp. 14, 23). And: *Where My*

Whole Body Came More Alive than It Ever Has Been, but Only in My Mind (p. 17). In the studio, she makes colorful body prints. One is gold, red, and green against white and startling in its brightness. She sets them aside and doesn't think about them again.

Fast forward two years to the start of the pandemic. Damoah experiences a crushing pain in her chest

Dr. Marie-Anne Mancio trained as an artist in interdisciplinary practice before gaining a PhD from Sussex University for her thesis "Maps for Wayward Performers: Feminist Readings of Contemporary Live Art Practice in Britain" and a subsequent M.Phil (Distinction) in Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow. She has written for myriad publications including *Make* (formerly *Women's Art Magazine*), *Soho Clarion*, and *Independent on Sunday*, and she has created online art history courses for Tate and Pearson's Love to Learn. (*Continues on next page*)

and calls the emergency services. The medical advice is to stay at home. She stays up until 6 a.m. crocheting, drinking tea, listening to podcasts, fearful that if she sleeps, she will never wake up again. Eventually, the pain passes. Then there is illness in the family, deaths of people close to her, an intense loneliness. In the isolation, she sets up a reading group, exploring critical theory by writers like Franz Fanon, deriving some comfort from the sense of fellowship that comes from virtual meetings. She reads and writes poetry. When she returns to her studio, she

hangs those very colorful works she made two years prior. She feels better.

What follows is a period of play. Making work but playing, really, without pressure of expectations or preconceptions (in fact, it was only after Damoah met with Sakhile Matlhare of Sakhile&Me that she even started to think of this period as work).

She re-reads Audre Lorde. Lorde knew plenty about pain. She had cancer three times. The first was in the breast. "I want to write about the pain," Lorde wrote on October 10th

Mancio was a researcher and contributor to a retrospective of the Theatre of Mistakes (Raven Row, London). She was also awarded a Proboscis grant to write an A-Z around the Theatre of Mistakes' archive. Mancio has lectured in art history nationally and internationally for institutions like Tate, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London Art Salon, The Course, and City Lit and she is an accredited Arts Society speaker who recently made a film for HENI talks on "The Bed in Art" and was a guest on performance artist Oriana Fox's "The O show." Her research interests include conceptual art, women artists, and the representation of women and sexuality in art. As a sex work advocate, she has also written historical fiction featuring sex workers, including her novella "Whorticulture" about four migrant women in antebellum America, and is currently working on a novel set in Caravaggio's Rome. Her fiction is represented by Sabhbh Curran (Curtis Brown).

Of mixed European and Uruguayan heritage, Mancio runs international art history study tours through her company Hotel Alphabet.

1978. "The pain of waking up in the recovery room which is worsened by that immediate sense of loss. Of going in and out of pain and shots. Of the correct position for my arm to drain. The euphoria of the second day, and how it's been downhill from there."¹

Then, in 1984, in the liver. Diagnosed as terminal by doctors in America and given only two to three years to live, Lorde went to Germany where she received naturopathic treatment.² She survived until 1992, but in those intervening years she was



Where My Whole Body Came More Alive than It Ever Has Been but Only in My Mind (2021); Pigment and spray paint on canvas; 76 x 76 cm

still challenging white feminists to acknowledge their systemic privileges; she was still writing and inspiring Afro-German women.

One was Ika Hügel-Marshall, who was active in the women's rights movement in Frankfurt and in ADEFRA (Afro-Deutsche Frauen). Meeting Lorde in 1987, the year cancer was found in Lorde's ovaries, Hügel-Marshall went on to write her autobiography, detailing her experiences of racism in Germany. She would later co-author the documentary film *Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992*.³ Other Afro-German women – writers, activists like May Ayim and Katharina Oguntoye – also published their history, their stories.

In 2020, Damoah revisits a key critical text for her, Lorde's 1978 essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" and she seeks to reconnect with joy as

Lorde suggests. Pleasure: experienced through the body, whether dancing alone in the studio, or staring at a tray of pure pigment and feasting on its color. A riot of colors: pinks, yellows, oranges, deep purples, coppers, sparkly whites, ultramarine, and cobalt blues. A departure from her usual palette of black, gold, red, white, and blue. Allowing chance elements to intrude, experimenting freely on different surfaces, including found objects. Building up patterns, layers. Then also uncovering, revealing what is concealed, like the meticulous undressing of a clothed body. In the process of scraping away, vertically, tidily, something new emerges.

Sometimes Damoah deliberately or accidentally destroys what was hidden, or she embeds it deeper below the surface, burying it like a secret. The work becomes a palimpsest, holding both the known and the unknown within it.

Other times, the original canvas disappears entirely, overlaid by gestures that change it beyond recognition. Only the artist can attest to its former appearance; the viewer is left with a surface that hints at what may lie below. Pigment obscures writing. Damoah's poems – a collection that, for now, is unread by everyone but its intended recipient, who may or may not exist – remain out of reach. Lines are revealed only in tantalizing fragments.

Until she feels it again: the exhilaration of being alive, "a feeling of stepping out of something very dark into the light." ⁴ All the while remembering that these acts of making are what heal her. In retrospect, even the choice of surfaces, however chance driven, feels prescient: handmade paper which was already in Damoah's studio is made of Khadi rag, renowned for being acid-free, as if the work was always about self-preservation.

Of course, the ensuing series 'Radical Joy' wasn't created in a vacuum. It owes much to Damoah's former research, in particular her investigations of three key artists who have influenced her practice: David Hammons, Yves Klein, and Ana Mendieta.

Hammons' technique for body prints involved him coating his skin, clothes, and hair in margarine then pressing against paper laid on top of illustration board, usually set on the floor. There was often a stasis in his performance – between rolling on paper and the act of getting up – a few minutes of contemplation where, amongst other things, he thought about the best way to move without smudging the image. He would follow this by sifting powdered pigments over the work and then spraying it with fixative.

Damoah has adapted this method. In place of margarine, she uses Shea

oil which is derived from the kernels of the seed of the *vitellaria paradoxa*, the shea tree which grows in East and West tropical Africa. Not only is this a meaningful material in terms of referencing her Ghanaian heritage; it, too, speaks to self-preservation, self-care. Rich in nutrients, it soothes and repairs skin, nourishing it with vitamins and antioxidants.

Yves Klein's 'Anthropometries' from the early 1960s made use of nude female models as 'living paintbrushes,' their breasts and thighs rolled in his vibrant, patented blue and pressed against surfaces. Before that, Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil collaborated on the 'Blueprints' series (1949-51)⁵: delicate cyanotypes, created with Weil's technique of shining ultra-violet light on a nude body posed on a big roll of architectural blueprint paper. As the negative shadow of the body's

outline developed, it was washed blue.

Damoah eschews these cool tones for a richer, warmer palette though there is a parallel, perhaps, between Klein's aim to replicate costly lapis lazuli and her using at least one precious pigment (her hot pink is six times the cost of an ordinary pink). Like Weil and Rauschenberg and Ana Mendieta, it is her own body that she deploys.

Except there's an unfair expectation that black artists have a responsibility to reference the weight of both their history and their present. Hammons' and Mendieta's practices were overtly political, reflecting their marginalized positions. Damoah's is rooted in the Ghanaian concept of 'Sankofa,' which believes it is important to understand the past in order not to repeat the same mistakes in the future and the present, and she has consistently engaged with

what she describes as “the continual consequences of the epistemic violence of colonialism and intersectional feminism.”⁶

In addition to those expectations, despite its prevalence, there is a historical bias against the woman artist using her body in a way that does not conform. If she is deemed too conventionally attractive (Schneemann, Wilke), her work may be commercially viable, but she is chastised for being vain or pandering to the ‘male gaze’; if her body is considered to lie outside those parameters, she is ‘othered.’

In the context of early mainstream feminist practice, using sexual imagery was declared even riskier. Feminists’ troubled conflation of the erotic and the pornographic led to the marginalization of artists like American painter Joan Semmel. In the early 1970s, she explored the erotic

from a female perspective painting high-key color nude couples having sex, only to find they were ill received by some women’s groups in the art world. She recalls, “[That] doing sexual art made me not politically correct seemed absurd. I ignored it. But I paid a price, in terms of being left out of certain shows.”⁷

If making such work was already difficult for a white woman (and Semmel’s was less controversial than that of peers Cosey Fanni Tutti or Betty Tomkins), how much harder would it have been for a black artist to explore desire? At the 2016 exhibition *Black Sheep Feminism: The Art of Sexual Politics* at Dallas Contemporary, for instance, which showcased Semmel amongst others, black artists were not represented. Just earlier this year, queer black photographer Ajamu X claimed, “I think we live in a country [UK] that has a fear of the erotic, a fear of pleasure.”⁸

These twin concerns – the sense of responsibility Damoah felt as a black artist to engage with weighty subjects and as a woman artist to be wary of eroticism as subject matter – led to her shying away from exploring that part of herself in her practice. However, as a consequence of the pandemic, during which she lived alone and was forced to spend time by herself, with herself, she was spurred into re-evaluating that self.

And in following Nietzsche's call to allow contradiction ("How else can we adapt and survive? How else can we accept new ideas?" Nietzsche asks), she found herself back with Lorde who argues in "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," that the erotic is about the deeply felt, that it can be a bridge that connects the spiritual to the political and is not something that should be confined to the realm of sex alone. "The erotic is a measure between

the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of its depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves." ⁹

For Damoah, this also meant accepting that, notwithstanding a sense of catharsis or empowerment that comes from educating oneself, of plugging gaps left by the (British) education system's treatment of history, there's an emotional and psychological cost to researching and enacting traumatic histories, of literally embodying that grief and pain, which is too often overlooked. (What was the psychic cost to Ana Mendieta of making her visceral performances that spoke to male violence, of smearing herself in blood and burning her silhouette?)



It's 3 a.m. and One of the Most Intense, Spiritual, Divinely Feminine, Creative, Sexual Experiences Just Happened in My Brain While I Slept off the Pain (2021); Pigment on canvas; 153 x 102 cm

Damoah recognized that her own practice typically put her body and mind under stress. But why must the black artist deny herself the celebration of the body-as-tool as a sensual entity? Why shouldn't a black artist also speak of joy and be authentic to all aspects of her experience? Lubaina Himid articulates similar feelings: "I need to be able to see myself. I need to make paintings that feel like what it means to be me. We need to feel we belong in those shared spaces. Telling stories of the black experience that are both everyday and extraordinary is what I'm here to do." ¹⁰

So Damoah made the shift with this series and permitted herself to use her body as a vehicle to express passion and desire, love, and longing, to dedicate herself to what Lorde describes as "the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy." It was an act of self-care, literally healing the psyche after continually

re-opening a wound. Just allowing herself the space to play, to make for the sake of making, felt like a radical act, Damoah says.

This, then, is how 'Radical Joy' got its title. The series was not conceived in chapters; its organization came later. Yet these chapter names "Moonlit Power," "Heavenly Bodies," "Mysteries of Desire," "The Embodiment of Play" conceal as much as they reveal, hinting at romance or sexuality whilst retaining an air of mystery. Perhaps the word "chapter" is deceptive because these works don't demand to be read in a linear fashion. They can be engaged with in the same spirit with which they were made: fluidly, simultaneously. That said, each has its own mood.

"Heavenly Bodies" sees a marked contrast between the velvety black backgrounds and bubble-gum colors that explode like fireworks in a night sky.

It's the most joyous chapter. The works on wood came from discarded panels Damoah found on the site of her studio. Their scale happened to be perfect for body prints, encompassing her knees to her head.

In *Where My Whole Body Came More Alive than It Ever Has Been, but Only in My Mind* (p. 17), the imprint of breasts sits, heart-shaped, at the center of the composition. Floating above, two co-joined views of the same face: a head caught turning, jawlines an inverted echo of the dip between the breasts. Meanwhile, the edges of the composition flare with their own drama: glow-red palms; a constellation in yellow and green crackling across the site of pain and pleasure towards the base.

The body could be curled up on its side in bed in each panel of the diptych *It's 3 a.m. and One of the Most Intense, Spiritual, Divinely Feminine, Creative, Sexual*

Experiences Just Happened in My Brain While I Slept off the Pain (pp. 14, 23), but there's nothing restful in the kick of legs or the illuminated yellow hand. The eye is pulled between a smudge of blue and a green knee. It's as if the two selves are in dialogue. Mind and body. Pain and pleasure.

This doubling recurs in *The Pain Took Me to Another Place with the Pleasure and It Was a Magical, Beautiful, Creative Womb Space* (p. 40) on an even bigger scale. Hands are thrown up as if the figures were caught by surprise, surrendering to the joy even as arms criss-cross between them. It is a neurological reality that the receptors for pain and pleasure are very closely situated and Damoah alludes to this in several titles. The triptych *Moon Cycle, Period, Full Moon. This Week, I Have Simultaneously Experienced Intense Pleasure and Excruciating Pain* (p. 48), for example.

The play of colors in 'Mysteries of Desire' is much subtler, tones and shapes emerging from a murky darkness. Everything is less defined. Titles could be descriptions or instructions: *Softly, Gently, Slowly* (p. 36), *So That Every Part of You Caresses Every Part of Me* (p. 37). Damoah became obsessed with Bataille in lockdown. She read all his erotic fiction, then his *L'érotisme* (1957) or "Death and Sensuality," as it is called in translation. (*Bataille Really Did Crack My Brain Open* is one of the titles of a work on wood from the 'Heavenly Bodies' chapter.) For Bataille, sex is always transgressive. He claims both eroticism and death lie at the heart of the human experience, and it is transgression, itself a manifestation of the world of play, which allows us to progress. Here, too, there are links with Ana Mendieta's practice which implicates viewers in the violence of its imagery. It's our identification with

others which causes us to confront ourselves. Such is the role of the erotic.

These works on paper are densely layered. *There's a Kind of Violence in My Desire for You* (p. 53) took months to complete, drinking in the most ink, the most pigment. Damoah would labor on it and then hang it up until it was dry (twenty-four hours) and return to it to appraise the composition. The paper grew weightier, and she stopped counting the layers after the eighth. The resulting composition, indeed the whole chapter, shares qualities with the sublime. With its drips and splayed body, it allures and frightens at the same time. A succubus waiting to envelop. Or is just capturing that urge for connection borne out of the pandemic where every sense seemed compromised – the absence of touch from a lover's kiss or grandchild's hug to the unwelcome press of a stranger's body on a crowded rush hour train; the

literal loss of taste and smell that came to characterize symptoms of Covid-19?

Damoah has said that *Moonlit Power* (p. 9) exists in its own magical realm. A lone work as a chapter. The recurring use of the moon as symbol across the series reminds us how much of women's lives are tied to its cycles, our bodies in flux, our moods lurching even. Luna, lunacy. The madness and magic. The moon as feminine. For centuries, we relied on its light to cut a path through darkness. As the Greek poet Sappho wrote, "When, round and full, her silver face, Swims into sight, and lights all space."

Moonlit Power is redolent of this history. It is mysterious. Dark when dimly lit, it invites contemplation. But shine a light on it, and all its colors glimmer, revealing themselves. This dual nature and the likelihood that not all the works in 'Radical Joy' will elicit joy, emphasize Damoah's point:

the impossibility of fully knowing joy until you have known pain. We oscillate between the two states in the intimacy of the gallery space, just as the pandemic elicited a complex, often contradictory, set of emotions. For many: gratitude for their good fortune that they were still alive coupled with a sense of mourning for who or what they were missing.

Not two endings, not really. Because neither the series nor the pandemic is over. The latter lingers on, refusing to die just yet, and the former is like an open invitation, which Damoah can accept at any time. She has come to describe 'Radical Joy' as "a palette cleanser," a rest from those intense, meditative works that characterized her practice before and will again. A breathing space before re-engaging with colonialism which she has described as her lifetime's work. She can even envisage keeping two separate studios in

future, like sculptor Louise Nevelson who retained one for her white works and one for her black. Text may play an increasingly important role, creating new possibilities for narratives to emerge.

For now, 'Radical Joy' reminds us that even during a period of the most intense pain, there can still be

pleasure if you dare to open yourself to receive it. As Lorde says, "When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives." And not a moment too soon.

¹ Audre Lorde *The Cancer Journals* Foreword by Tracy K. Smith 2020 [orig. 1980] UK Penguin Classics, p.17

² Lorde discusses her choice in her essay collection *A Burst of Light* Toronto: Women's Press, 1988.

³ *Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992*, 2012, documentary, Director Dagmar Schultz

⁴ Conversations with the author, August and November 2021

⁵ See for instance 'Light Borne in Darkness' (ca. 1951), by Susan Weil and Robert Rauschenberg, monoprint: exposed blueprint paper, 6.25 x 9.75 inches. Milwaukee Art Museum

⁶ For a fuller appreciation of the breadth of Damoah's practice see her website <https://adelaidedamoahart.com>

⁷ <https://hyperallergic.com/457281/beer-with-a-painter-joan-semmel/> accessed on 05/11/ 2021

⁸ https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/v7mjmj/ajamu-x-archive-black-queer-history-photography accessed on 09/11/ 2021

⁹ Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" 1978 in Lorde, *Sister Outsider* California: The Crossing Press, 2007, pp.53- 59

¹⁰ Interview with Zoe Whitely <https://artbasel.com/news/lubaina-himid---telling-stories-of-the-black-experience-that-are-both-everyday-and-extraordinary-is-what-i-m-here-to-do-> accessed 31/10/2021





Installation view of
Moon Cycle, Period, Full Moon, I Have Simultaneously Experienced Intense Pleasure and Excruciating Pain (2021)



Detail of *Slowly,
Softly, Gently* (2021)

SAKHILE MATLHARE

In Conversation with Adelaide Damoah

Hi Adelaide, thank you for making time for this conversation. I wanted us to talk about 'Radical Joy,' about the first time you mentioned it to me and how you described your experience and the process of making the work. So let's begin with how you started exploring and creating these pieces and I'll also highlight some of the things that stood out to me or that pulled me into this work when you were initially sharing it with me.

Adelaide Damoah: You know what's funny is that I can't actually remember

that first conversation and I am usually really good at remembering. But I think that it's just because so much has happened since then in terms of the making of the work and the developing of the work.

I probably started making work using these multiple colors when I was working on a project with a company called Method which was two or three years ago now. They asked me to design the cover of a soap bottle which sounded funny at first but it actually ended up being a really fun and interesting project because it challenged

me to use colors that are not typically within the spectrum of colors that I use – because generally, in terms of the way I work currently, I will tend to pick specific colors which relate to the thing that I am speaking about, that I am trying to talk about. And because I am speaking generally about colonialism, feminism, spirituality, family, history, memory, all of these things, which are quite intense and heavy subjects, the colors tend to be mostly monochromatic, maybe one or two colors max and those colors tend to be black, red, blue, and gold. And there are specific reasons why I am choosing these colors which may relate to skin color, it may relate to gold, which is in reference to the Gold Coast as in Ghana, and red is in relation to bloodline or violence, and then the blue is a direct conversation with Yves Klein and his 1960 performance.

But on this occasion I was trying to convey joy at the same time as this kind of citrusy sort of freshness, to do with cleanliness. So I went with purple, yellow, and similar colors. I created what must have been about five or six different tests with large canvases and lots of pigment. And I didn't really think about them after that. I chose the one that I felt was most appropriate for the project and I rolled everything up and I didn't think about it again because I felt like it wasn't relevant to my practice, as fun as it was to do, it wasn't really relevant to what I was doing and I didn't feel like it was saying anything at the time.

And then obviously lockdown happened, and I got sick. So many people I knew got sick, people were dying, friends of friends were dying, and everything got very serious very quickly. That combined with the fact that I live by myself. I'm lucky enough to have a very short commute

to my studio from where I live and also to have 24/7 access to the studio, so there were multiple things I was doing to occupy my mind and to cheer myself up and I decided to just, on a whim, to bring out those canvases. I brought them out and I had them in the studio. I put them up around the studio and initially it was just about feeling better because I surrounded myself with these joyful bright colors and then I started working on them.

I started to see where I could take them. In doing that I became – I don't even remember how – but I decided that I am obsessed with hot pink and started using it obsessively. And you know for me with dry pigment, for me that is where I find the most pure intensity of color. Using dry pigments as opposed to paint, which all sorts of things have been added to, which can make the color not look as intense as

when it is just the raw dry pigment. So I started using that and just playing with it and initially it was about enjoying the process, just for the sake of it, just having fun, throwing pigment around and it getting everywhere (*laughs*). And in that process it started to help me feel better. It made me feel like I was doing something that was lifting some of the heaviness of the work that I had been doing.

Then come into 2021, at the beginning of the year I was making work for Signature African Art Gallery which was again going back to that heaviness of colonialism, speaking about World War II and my family. So again we had the black and the gold and blues and I ended up making this massive piece, which is the biggest piece that I have ever made, which was repeated images of a World War II soldier from Ghana. Going through that and referencing my family members who had

fought in the war, again we had that heaviness. It was an amazing project, I really enjoyed it, but we were talking about the seriousness and death while, in real-time, already being surrounded by that.

I immersed myself in that project for three or four months. Then we launched it and it was great, but again I wanted to immerse myself, as sort of a palate/palette cleanser, in these colors again and really enjoying the process, again. First it was just for me, it turned into something that was kind of healing for me and something that was

grounding me in my body again. But it was a very physical act of making the work. It was really backbreaking work, by the time I was finished my back was killing me. So for me grounding myself in my body again, and reminding myself of the power of the body and the power of sensuality and allowing myself to feel things and going back to my writing again and realizing that in the past year I have actually written a lot of quite romantic poetry for some reason and connecting that to that work and just feeling, allowing myself to feel joy in the middle of



Softly, Gently, Slowly (2021); Pigment and ink on hand made khadi paper; 83 x 198 cm

absolute chaos just helped me to feel a lot better and it helped me to feel alive again and start going back to the gym again and you know, really feel connected to myself.

Yes, feeling grounded in yourself. I remember you saying that you were nervous to show me the work. And I remember that initial conversation. It was when we wanted to have a catch-up call and I said, if you happen to be in your studio, it would be great to combine our call with a studio visit and those were the works that happened to be up at the time. So I

got to see some of them, or at least I got to see some of the earlier ones. I think the conversation ended up being about that because then you also shared about your writing. You had been working on a piece of writing, I don't know if by then it was connected to 'Radical Joy,' but I think you were seeing it as related. I recall mentioning Osi Adu's work *Happy Dance* to you because I saw this connection with your writing and later with the way you were talking about the making of 'Radical Joy.' And at the time I was also having conversations



So That Every Part of You Caresses Every Part of Me (2021); Pigment and ink on hand made khadi paper; 81 x 195 cm

with friends about this idea of the pain and loss co-existing with gratitude and joy, how those seemingly contradictory experiences can live in the same space.

You described the making of 'Radical Joy' as a kind of palate/palette cleanser for you. When I first saw the work, you were talking about this idea of the bright colors emerging from the dark, similar to the feeling of coming out of deep isolation or finding joy in a dark period. Seeing the work as you described your experience at the time you were making it conjured up an image in my mind. I don't know what it is called, but when people burn a field or burn a forest to remove or burn off the dried-up bark or the plants that have died. It is not only to reduce the chances of wild fires, but also to enrich the soil with nutrients once the burning has gone through. So there is new growth that

comes from the scorching and that new growth has all this richness to nurture it, to feed it. The burning is not simply destructive. It makes way for new growth. And that's how I was seeing these works when I was first looking them and listening to you describe your experience of making them.

Adelaide Damoah: Yes, absolutely.

It's not just that you're thinking about the history or the connection between Ghana and the UK, you're thinking about colonialism as this very large umbrella, but you're also considering, as you've said, the generational traumas that have gone through your family, but not only the traumas but also the strength that's been passed down. Because in your performances, it's almost like you're conjuring, like you're speaking to spirits. It's almost like you're ...

Adelaide Damoah: Calling the ancestors, yes.

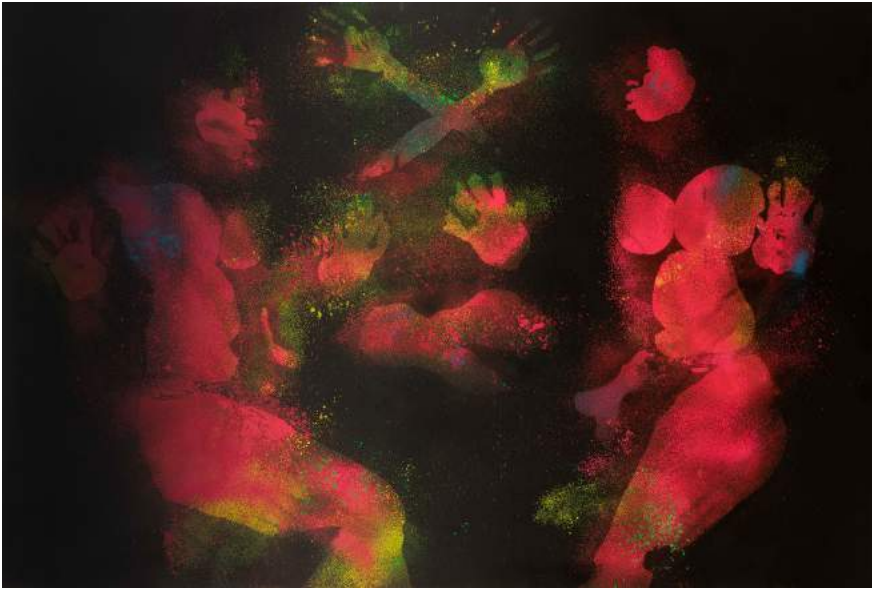
Yes, exactly. The idea that when people pass on, they don't disappear, they move on to another plane and they actually live on through us. The same way that as you're living today, the things that you're doing now are also impacting generations to come. Your actions are not just contained within you, they don't only impact you and your life, they also impact others.

Adelaide Damoah: Yes, yes.

And in the way you were talking about 'Radical Joy' – and please correct me if I am wrong – there was a sense of liberation and yet also a fear in sharing. But it would seem that even in the fun, free, intensely sensual and playful aspects of 'Radical Joy,' there is a connection to your other work.

Adelaide Damoah: Yeah. I think it's precisely because there is an expectation on me because I'm really quite specific about connecting the work that I do to concepts that are personal, political, and which I feel have such deep historical relevance. So in a way there is a kind of feeling of some kind of responsibility when doing a certain kind of work.

So then, this expectation is troubled if I am then doing something, which for me is fun but also feels that there may be a trivial element in it compared to what I usually do. And because what I usually do is so steeped in research and it could be taken in quite an academic way whereas this is so personal and more open and free flowing. Though there is a connection, I suppose; in terms of connecting it to art history, there is a connection. The techniques that I'm using always relate to David Hammons – well it's not actually history, I mean, he is here...



The pain took me to another place with the pleasure and it was a magical beautiful creative womb space (2021); Pigment on canvas; 120 x 183 cm

Oh, well, but at the same time, we are in it.

Adelaide Damoah: Yeah. We are in it. I don't know if it was a fear of it appearing to be trivial or not important. I don't know. Not that I am saying that the other work was important or is important, necessarily. To some people it might not be, but to me it is because it is about legacy, right? And that's obvious with the older work where maybe it's less obvious with 'Radical Joy.'

I mean, talking about having gratitude alongside pain and all of the things that happen in life – life isn't black and white, it is shades of gray, there is everything that's going on simultaneously. And I try to have a gratitude practice and I do my journaling – I've been slack with it recently, but before I was quite diligent in that every single day I would write down three things that I felt grateful for regardless of what was happening, if

things were good or things were bad. A scientific research study has actually shown that having an attitude of gratitude and having a gratitude practice impacts your mental health in positive ways.

But I feel like doing this work has taken the place of that because when I am making this work I am having fun. I am in the studio playing music, dancing. I might sit there looking at the thing for a while and meditating on it but before I do that I am dancing around the studio - whatever space I can find for myself, right? *(Both laugh)*

Yeah. And I love that. When I saw all those colors everywhere it sort of reminded me of the Holi festival of colors. When you thought of the work as “radical joy,” what does that phrase reflect for you?

Adelaide Damoah: I think initially because I was feeling like – going back to

that whole thinking about the seriousness or not seriousness of this work – the fact that making work that just feels joyous to me was a radical act in and of itself. Specifically because of the fact that, and I am not saying this happens to all artists of color, but perhaps for many artists of color living in the Western world or in the art world that we inhabit, this art ecosystem that we inhabit, there is an expectation, or it feels like there is an expectation, that to be taken seriously you can’t just make work for the sake of making work. You have to make work that is about the pain and suffering that your people have experienced.

Or work that is “saying something.”

Adelaide Damoah: Or work that is saying something, yes. And those are the artists that make the most impact in the art world. Whereas by and large white artists have the luxury of

doing whatever they feel like doing and call it art and be taken seriously as whatever they present themselves as. So for me it felt like removing the chains of expectation and just doing whatever I feel like doing, for the sake of enjoying the process, for the sake of having fun.

Even with these enduring expectations, with your experience and how this work has come about, what are some ways you would like to have audiences engage with it?

Adelaide Damoah: I'd like for people to just experience it. And if they have questions, they can ask questions. I think that would be nice. And the way that I have named these is that each one has a line from a poem I've written over the past year. So depending on how the works are placed, that is how it will be read. You see what I mean?

Yes, I like that.

Adelaide Damoah: It could end up being really random or nonsensical or it could end up having a whole new meaning.

I do like the partial, the not knowing, not knowing how people will respond to the work. There is a sense that even if someone encounters your work and they don't yet know the context, the works have this air of mystery but the pops of color make you feel that there is something positive going on here.

Adelaide Damoah: Yes. And I have decided that this is a really important and integral part of my practice now. I will always keep going back to this; I will just constantly be making this work now. At first, I was a little nervous about it, but I'm a feel-the-fear-and-do-it-anyway kind of person. I know that this has been so good for me and I need to keep doing it. So I will keep making them.

I mean, as I said, for me 'Radical Joy' doesn't seem like a departure from your other work.

Adelaide Damoah: Yes.

That's why I was asking you how you think of the work as "radical joy" – in that it's not only radical in a theoretical sense. Like, "Isn't it great to have a Black woman create this work?" when people may expect you to be creating work that is heavy laden with intense, serious topics. But considering what happens when we count joy as part of the "serious stuff." And there have been writers in the past who talk about how dealing with and talking about racism, sexism, other forms of oppression can be exhausting and pulls energy from us, leaving us drained so we don't have energy to take care of ourselves or to carve out time to be joyful and to do things that bring us joy. This capacity to

practice or experience joy isn't just connected to feeling well or at ease in a physical sense, but it is also about having space to just be. This is part of what excites me about 'Radical Joy' and why I see it as part of your other work.

Adelaide Damoah: And it was fun. And that energy is going into the work and that energy is, whenever I listen to music that makes me dance, I feel joy. Anybody who has seen me in a party situation knows that I love to dance. I love to dance. Dancing is my happy place. I am not a professional dancer by any stretch but I dance like no one is watching, like I don't care. I'm a grown woman and I don't care. Everybody will be looking at me, but when everybody sees me dancing they want to join in. They want to join because they can see the pure joy that is coming from me doing that. So that's what I want, I want to infuse the pure energy of that into this work.

But what I'm finding is that there are such different strands of this work now. It's like there's been these four or five personalities that have emerged from this work. It was not planned, it just happened like that. Which is almost a reflection of how we are as human beings with all of these things existing in the same person. They may appear to be contradictions but they are not contradictions, we're complex people, we're complex creatures. So I feel

like that complexity can be seen – that even though they are all body prints, they are made in different ways and they look different. Some of them look darker than others, some of them look more mysterious than others, some of them look more immediate than others. Some of them look more labored than others. Some of them look just direct and easy to digest whereas others are less easy. And that is part of what it is to be alive.



ADELAIDE DAMOAH

Biography

British-Ghanaian artist Adelaide Damoah is a London-based multi-disciplinary artist, using investigative practices which currently span painting, performance, collage, image transfer, and photographic processes. Key areas of interest for interrogation are colonialism, spirituality, and intersectional feminism. After studying applied biology at Kingston University in Surrey (UK), her subsequent career in the pharmaceutical industry was cut short following a diagnosis of the chronic illness endometriosis. While convalescing, she dedicated herself to art.

Since her debut exhibition *Black Brits* in 2006 at Charlie Allen's Boutique in London (UK), Damoah has exhibited in myriad group shows including at Opera Gallery in Budapest (Hungary) in 2009; at Bargehouse Gallery in London (UK) in 2015 as part of the AACDD Festival; at 198 Gallery in London (UK) in 2017; at the Nubuke Foundation in Accra (Ghana) in 2017 during the Chale Wote Street Art Festival; at the UNFOLD Festival in London (UK) in 2017; at Bisi Silva's *The Gallery of Small Things* in Dakar (Senegal) in 2018; at Bonhams in London (UK) in 2018; at Little Africa

in Marrakesh (Morocco) in 2018; and at the Novo Foundation in London (UK) in 2018.

In 2019, Damoah and the BBFA Collective were selected for *No Room for Fear*, curated by SMO Contemporary at Hogan Lovells in London (UK), *Under the Skin* at the Royal College of Physicians Museum in London (UK), and ArtX Lagos with TAFETA. The following year she exhibited at

Sakhile&Me in Frankfurt (Germany), Boogie Wall Gallery in London (UK), and Flowers Gallery in London (UK), and she participated in 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London (UK) with Sakhile&Me and Boogie Wall Gallery. Most recently, her work has shown at the Royal West of England Academy in Bristol (UK), Leicester Contemporary in Leicester (UK), Signature African Art in London (UK) and PADA in Lisbon (Portugal).



Moon Cycle, Period, Full Moon. This Week, I Have Simultaneously Experienced Intense Pleasure and Excruciating Pain (2021); Triptych; Pigment and spray paint on wooden board; 121 x 192 cm

Past solo exhibitions include *Supermodels* at Nolia's Gallery in London (UK) in 2008; at the National Centre for Domestic Violence in London (UK) in 2009; *This is Us* at the Camden Image Gallery in London (UK) in 2015; *Genesis* at MTArt Agency in London (UK) in 2018; her first solo exhibition as an academician at the Royal West of England Academy in Bristol (UK) in 2020; *Reembodying The Real* at Boogie Wall Gallery in London (UK) in 2020; and her first international solo exhibition *Radical Joy* at Sakhile&Me in Frankfurt (Germany) in 2021.

She has performed internationally, including her ongoing 'Confronting Colonization' project with the performance *Into The Mind Of The Colonizer* at Fridman Gallery in New York (USA) in 2020 and *Still Rising* in Oslo (Norway) in 2019; *Reanimating Shadow Projections of the Real* at Black Shade Projects in Marrakesh (Morocco) in

2020; *#MYFACE* at the British High Commission in Lagos (Nigeria) in 2019, the Cannes Lions Festival in Cannes (France) in 2019, and M&C Saatchi in London (UK) in 2019; *This is Me: The Inconsistency of the Self* at the Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration in Paris (France) in 2019; and *Adidas' Calling all Creators* in Portland (USA) in 2018.

Damoah has works in public and private collections nationally and internationally. She is a founding member of the Black British Female Artists Collective (BBFA) and she is a co-founder of the Intersectional Feminist Art Collective (INFEMS). In 2019, Damoah became the first black artist to be appointed an academician of the Royal West of England Academy (RWA) and she was an invited artist and selector at their open exhibition in Bristol (UK). In 2021, Damoah joined as a trustee of Block 336 Project Space, a registered charity in London, UK.

Installation view of
Moonlit Power (2021)



ADELAIDE DAMOAH

Exhibitions

Solo Exhibitions

2021

Radical Joy, Sakhile&Me,
Frankfurt, Germany

2020

Reembodying the Real,
Boogie Wall Gallery, London,
UK

Reembodying the Real, Royal
West of England Academy,
Bristol, UK

2018

Genesis, MArt Agency,
London, UK

2015

This is Us, Camden Image
Gallery, London, UK

2011

Hotel Locanda, Venice, Italy

2009

National Centre for Domestic
Violence, London, UK

2008

Supermodels, Nolia's Gallery,
London, UK

Black Lipstick, Bernie Grant
Art Center, London, UK

2006

Black Brits, Charlie Allen
Bespoke, London, UK

Group Exhibitions

2021

*RWA Collection: Our
Heritage, Our Future*, Royal
West of England Academy,
Bristol, UK

No Reserve (INFEMS),
Leicester Contemporary,
Leicester, UK

1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair (Sakhile&Me), London, UK

Biting Back & Enjoying the Taste (INFEMS), PADA, Lisbon, Portugal

A History Untold, Signature African Art, London, UK

Reclaiming The Body, Virtual Online Museum of Art

2020

Small is Beautiful, Flowers Gallery, London, UK

Winter Exhibition, Boogie Wall Gallery, London, UK

168 Annual Open, Royal West of England Academy, Bristol, UK

1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair (Boogie Wall Gallery & Sakhile&Me), London, UK

Figures, Sakhile&Me, Frankfurt, Germany

Her Eyes, They Never Lie, Black Shade Projects, Marrakesh, Morocco

Drivers of the Future, MTArt Agency, London, UK

2019

Still Rising, Rafiki Arts, Oslo, Norway

Art X Lagos (TAFETA Gallery), Lagos, Nigeria

No Room for Fear (BBFA Collective), Hogan Lovells, London, UK

Under the Skin, Royal College of Physicians Museum, London, UK

Visual Diet, M&C Saatchi, London, UK

2018

BBFA Presents (BBFA Collective), TAFETA Gallery, London, UK

Muse, Model or Mistress?, Gallery Different, London, UK

From Violence to a Place of Power, Novo Foundation, London, UK

After Cesaire/Modern Tropiques, Platform Southwark, London, UK

We Face Forward!, Bonhams, London, UK

Marrakesh Off the Tracks, Little Africa, Marrakesh, Morocco

The Gallery of Small Things, Bisi Silva Project, Dakar, Senegal

2017

The Gallery of Small Things, Bisi Silva Project, Dakar, Senegal

Article 10, Amnesty International, London, UK

Sankofa, Latham and Watkins LLP, London, UK

UNFOLD Festival, London, UK

Dispersed (BBFA Collective), Nubuke Foundation, Accra, Ghana



There Is a Kind of Violence in My Desire for You (2021); Pigment and ink on hand made khadi paper; 111 x 162 cm

A Seat at the Table, 198
Gallery, London, UK

2016

Untitled, Latham and
Watkins LLP, London, UK

2015

Vision to Reality (BBFA
Collective), TEDx Euston,
London, UK

AACDD Festival (BBFA
Collective), Bargehouse
Gallery, London, UK

2009

British Art in the 21st

Century, Opera Gallery,
Budapest, Hungary

Screen Nation Awards,
British Academy of Film and
Television Arts, London, UK

2007

I2U Gallery, London, UK

2006

Francophone Space
African Arts Portsmouth,
Portsmouth, UK

2005

Buffalo Film Festival,
Clapham, UK

Installation view of
Softly, Gently, Slowly (2021)



„Softly, gently, slowly“



„So that every part of you caresses every part of me“

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Sakhile&Me | Hagemeyer & Matlhare GbR

Oberlindau 7, D-60323 Frankfurt a. M.

+49 (0) 69 - 770 611 00

art@sakhileandme.com

www.sakhileandme.com