



ODILI DONALD ODITA

Bridge, 2014

Grand Lobby wall painting

Commissioned by the Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech

Created over the course of 25 days in October 2014

On view through November 1, 2015

Expansive scale, brilliant color, compositional complexity, and rhythmic energy

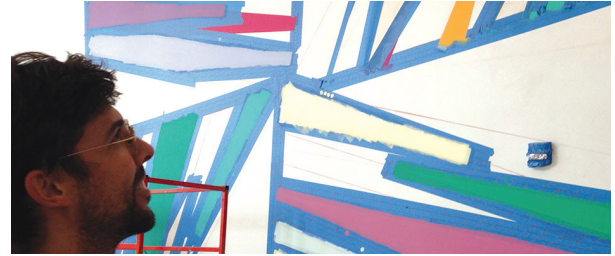
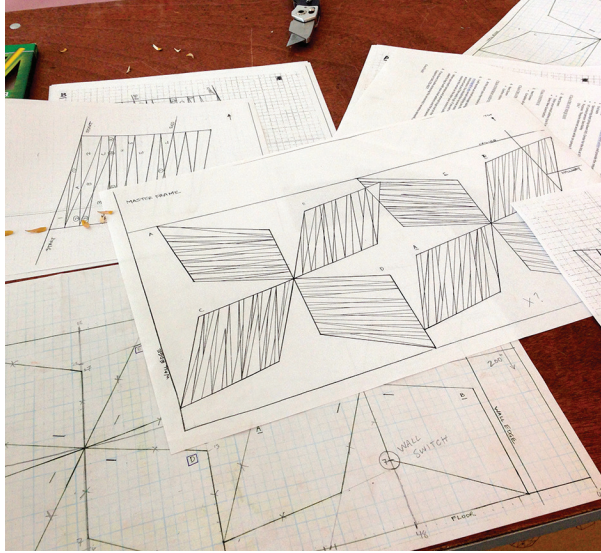




▲ *Bridge*, 2014
Acrylic on wall
17 x 35 feet
Photo credit: Edmee Rodriguez
Photography

Conceived by Odili Donald Odita and implemented by his painting assistants Alan Prazniak and Adam Sultan, this dynamic, expansive wall painting was created with 40 different colors.

Bridge, 2014 is supported in part by a generous donation of 80 quarts of paint by Valley Paint, a locally owned, independent Benjamin Moore retailer.



Evolving Geometries

In the first part of the 20th century, artists such as Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Kasimir Malevich (1879–1935), and Piet Mondrian (1892–1944) explored a vocabulary of simple geometric forms—rectangles, triangles, squares, and lines—in abstract compositions that addressed universal truths and utopian ideas. Building on this tradition, Odili Donald Odita re-invents and transforms the genre, masterfully mining the expressive and metaphoric power of line, color, and form in dynamic paintings on canvas and wall installations. He begins with line, transforming it into geometric shapes and irregular bands of color that evolve into elongated triangles, trapezoids, and parallelograms that stream, intersect, and diverge from each other. Compositional complexity, rhythmic energy, and striking color combine in Odita's work as he fuses the vibrant textile and patterning heritage of Africa with Western traditions of geometric abstraction.¹ Some of his paintings are abstracted Nigerian landscapes, his country of origin, or "remembered mountains and rivers obscured by time and space."² Some of his abstractions refer to interior mindscapes or planes of consciousness. The geometric patterning in *Bridge*, 2014 references twirling windmills, reflecting an evolving dynamic of creative energies and ideas being generated through the Center for the Arts. Other paintings have underlying social and political intonations. Regardless, Odita's work is distinctly of this time and place, and has been likened to visualizations of electronic music, television test-band patterns, and streaming data.

For Odita, color is a potent signifier, just as pattern and its disruption can convey notions of connection and disconnection. His vivid, pulsating hues symbolize energy and surging life forces. "Color," remarks Odita, "speaks to intensity in life." He also speaks about color in terms of the politics of specificity and difference, and "a search for a state of being and presence within space."³

Odita talks about this in reference to his own life. Born in Nigeria, he was raised in the United States, living between two cultures—between American culture and strong African traditions (his father, also a painter, is an art historian and founder of the history of African art program at Ohio State University).⁴ The vibrant bands of color in Odita's works are "designs in space," but also visual allegories of the mind and soul searching for a sense of place, not just for the artist, himself, but for entire peoples. "Color represents freedom," he says. "It is the third space."⁵ This concept takes visual form in *Bridge*, 2014, as well as in the paintings featured in a Center for the Arts exhibition presented in the Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery between September 25 and November 20, 2014. The wall painting and the works featured in the gallery all suggest surging movement upwards, outwards, and towards other horizons, while at the same time facing alternate currents.

With what almost seems like electric velocity, a multiplicity of vibrant, angular shapes stream across the surface of the painting *Feedback*, 2014, one of several works in Odita's recent one-person exhibition here at the Moss Art Center. Its title connotes music or filmic terms, such as input, output, or even "echo," as the artist remarked. *Powerline*, another work in the exhibition, is "about drawing and the force of line coming through space," with intersecting bands of color receding towards interior spatial planes. Both paintings, for the artist, reflect the idea of searching for some new space.

At the same time, while these paintings reflect a search for "entry or access to location," they also reflect dislocation, fragmentation, and destabilization.

Gate, 2013, also in the exhibition, depicts short geometric wedges moving in multiple directions, but intersected and blocked at each juncture so that imagery reaches upwards, but seems to crystallize into a kaleidoscope of vividly colored shards. The reference here is to entry/access/barriers, and the notion of open and closed. Though more subtle in some canvases than others, Odita's works are embedded with social and philosophical implications that have to do with collision, displacement, color, and race.



"What is most interesting to me," states Odita, "is a fusion between cultures where things that seem faraway and disparate have the ability to function within an almost seamless flow. The fusion I seek is one that can represent a type of living within a world of difference. No matter the discord, I believe through art there is a way to weave the different parts into an existent whole, and where metaphorically, the notion of a common humanity can be understood as a real choice."⁶

In essence, despite rigorous challenges, the message Odita seeks to convey through his dynamic and invigorating compositions is unifying and affirmative—one that envisions a better future.

Margo Ann Crutchfield
Curator at Large



◀ Gate, 2013

Acrylic on canvas
72 x 90 inches
Collection of Valentino
Carlotti, New York

▲ Powerline, 2003

Acrylic on canvas
84 x 109 inches
Collection of the artist
Courtesy of Jack Shainman
Gallery, New York

Notes

All quotes by the artist other than those listed below are from a conversation with the curator on October 10, 2014, in the Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery.

1. For a list of African textiles and cultures that are sources of inspiration for the artist, see: Odili Donald Odita quoted in an interview by Robert Hobbs in Hans Ulrich Obrist, Robert Hobbs, Zander Blom, *Africa and Abstraction: Mancoba, Odita, Blom* (Capetown, South Africa: Stevenson, 2012), 36.
2. Sola Agustsson, "Odili Donald Odita's Mesmerizing Paintings," *Whitewall Magazine* (Oct. 24, 2013): <http://whitewallmag.com/art/odili-donald-oditas-mesmerizing-paintings>.
3. Statement by the artist quoted in the press release for his exhibition *This, That and the Other* (2013) at the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.
For an expanded discussion by the artist on color see: Odili Donald Odita Interview with Robert Hobbs in Hans Ulrich Obrist, Robert Hobbs, Zander Blom, *Africa and Abstraction: Mancoba, Odita, Blom* (Capetown, South Africa: Stevenson, 2012).
4. Hobbs, et al. p.36.
Odili Odita sees himself as an African in the way he was raised, and in the belief system he was brought up in through his parentage. He thinks of himself, specifically, as a Nigerian-American, but also as a global citizen.
5. Statement by the artist quoted in the press release for his exhibition *This, That and the Other* (2011) at the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.
6. Ibid.

Odita has created a number of large-scale, site-specific wall installations, ranging from his project in the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007) to a major wall installation at Kiasma, the Contemporary Art Museum in Helsinki (2011). Below, Odita speaks about his response to the history and architecture of the Moss Arts Center and his concept for *Bridge*.

Artist Statement

When arriving at the Moss Arts Center, I was struck by the long and jagged walkway that leads up to the monumental structure seen within a fielded landscape and surrounding park grounds. My initial feelings were of astonishment; this building seemed to rise up out of the ground, singular and apart from the neighboring structures within its environment. A grounding factor was the stone that comprised much of the exterior structure of this building. The stone itself is saturated with a color that is dominant and starkly present, yet analogous with its surround of sparse green grass and blue-gray sky. This stone's glow helped to give the feeling that this building could have been carved out of, rather than built into its environs.

There was another feeling I had of disjuncture. There seemed to be a general question of connection between the celestial, upward nature of the windows against the earthly bound quality of the stone. This feeling changed as I entered the building through its main doors and walked toward the center stairwell. The building sang from this point forward as I walked through the grand, the curvilinear stairwell and into its majestic concert hall. The concert space resonated with the joyous glory of a choir in full effect—the heavens opened up at the ceiling through

the design of magnificent arched panels that glide upward with the grace of angels. It was in the stairwell, at the heart of the building, where it all began to make sense for me—this is where I understood the narrative between the forces of parts that are the stone, the windows, like steeples of a church, and the concert hall. Altogether these parts spoke to me with the grandeur of a magnum opus. I knew from that point I had to make a design that would build a bridge, and continue the reconciliation between these distinctive parts.

My design has in mind crossroads; crossroads as the point of direction and change where choice and action is made. I wanted to make a form that is like a windmill rotating with this force of change. I wanted to create a space that is both reflective and attentive to the design forces throughout the building, and generate in my installation movements that begin to unlock the energies stored within the center's walls. It is my intention to have the wall painting rotate with color in a big and expansive way, showering its forces outward throughout the center's dynamic inner core.

—Odili Donald Odita
September 25, 2014

Odili Donald Odita Exhibition

Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery, Moss Art Center
September 25–November 20, 2014

Bridge, 2014, was part of and an extension of Odili Donald Odita's recent one-person exhibition presented by the Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech. The exhibition was one of three solo exhibitions in a suite titled *Evolving Geometries: Line, Form, and Color*, which featured Patrick Wilson and Manfred Mohr in addition to Odili Donald Odita.

Works in the Exhibition:

Feedback, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 90 inches
Collection of the artist
Courtesy of Bridgette Mayer Gallery, Philadelphia

The Gate, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 72 inches
Collection of Valentino Carlotti, New York

REM, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
50 x 60 inches
Collection of Valentino Carlotti, New York

Powerline, 2003
Acrylic on canvas
84 x 109 inches
Collection of the artist
Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

About the artist

Odili Donald Odita was born in Enugu, Nigeria, from which his family fled just before the start of the Biafran war in 1967. He was raised in the United States, received a BA in art from Ohio State University and a MFA from Bennington College, Vermont. He now lives and works in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he is an associate professor of painting at the Tyler School of Art.



◀ *REM*, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
40 x 60 inches
Collection of
Valentino Carlotti,
New York

Odita's work has been exhibited extensively in international solo and group exhibitions, including the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007); the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2008); Princeton University (2009); the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston (2010); The Global Africa Project, Museum of Arts and Design, New York (2010); the Savannah College of Art and Design Museum of Art (2012); and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (2009).

Odita has created wall painting commissions for The United States Mission to the United Nations in New York (2011); the New Orleans Museum of Art (2011); Kiasma, Helsinki (2011); the Savannah College of Art and Design (2012); and Princeton University (2019). Upcoming are projects planned for the Smithsonian Museum of African Art and Yale University. Odita's work is in numerous public and private collections, including The Studio Museum in Harlem, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and the Birmingham Museum of Art.



For more information about this and future exhibitions, visit www.artscenter.vt.edu.

Front cover:

Bridge, 2014 (detail). Acrylic on wall. 17 x 35 feet. Photo credit: Brian Yohn