

Chris Ofilli

Serpentine Gallery Oct 98 & Tate  
gallery till 10<sup>th</sup> Jan 99

Chris Ofilli 1998 Turner prize-winner staged a solo exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery through October 1998, and is currently exhibited as part of the Turner prize show at the Tate gallery.

Infamous for his elephant dung, an unnecessary garnish to his work: - bold and vivid paintings loaded with otherwise delicate black cultural issues. Of Nigerian Igbo parentage, he represents a microcosm of contemporary African society which Britain is coming to terms with i.e. the second generation African émigré: - typified by a removal from both cultures but participant within both. This appears to set the scene for Mr Ofilli's work, or does it? It's seemingly deliberate ambiguity prompts a slight nudge at this smug shell. From a second generation African émigré perspective, reveals nothing special save for a disguised narrative of our collective subconscious. An obsessive painting technique plundered from sources opaque from mainstream contemporary art and the rich syncretism inherent to contemporary West Coast African culture. His Myth and appeal centres on his black diasporic positioning and the ambiguous matrix in which it resides. Drawing unconsciously perhaps on Senghors Negritude positing itself a defining position of black ideology, fraught in its

very nature i.e. as an antithesis to the dominant syllogism of European discourse, Ofilli is ensnared in the very stereotype which he toys with: - 'the emotive sensitivity' of the Negro.

Drawing on historic African representation (Art as perceived from without) and contemporary African art, a language and attitude is crystallised which is perceived as uniquely Ofilli. San cave paintings from Zimbabwe and contemporary African Urban and International Art are plundered to underpin his cultural narrative. His paintings can be categorised as essentially figurative and vividly decorative: - Man and his covering as the encapsulating whole in which his narrative resides.

'The Chosen One', a series of six tablets of black faces are blatant copies of the barber shop signs which adorn the streets of Nigerian communities urban and rural reproduced here for gallery consumption. Interpreted as referring to the indistinguishable black male within British society. True maybe but why the appropriation of *Bonsue*, *Onboard* and *Bobo Ajasco* in their innocence for egotistical pleasure? 'She' 1997, a kaleidoscope of psychedelic colour presents a nineteen sixties black female straddling the borderline between purity and the carnality of youth sufficiently contained within its taunting eroticism. This period of black consciousness provides material for the Ofilli narrative expressed

vividly in the Captain Shit series: - a statement on the boundaries of black Stardom and its permitted niche. 'The Adoration of Captain Shit and the Legend of the Black Stars' 1998, illustrates a fictional comic character in the psychedelic gory of a hero fronting a myriad of black stars with blacked out faces leaving only the eyes to emphasise the anonymity of stars behind. Outstretched pink hands grab at his lower torso: - the frantic desire for possession of Captain Shit by the public. Reference made to African American popular culture of the 1960's and 70's. 'Foxy Roxy' 1997, a disturbing racial hybrid of degenerate womanhood draws on Ofilli's immersion in the heart of London perversity; - Kings cross where his studio is located. This painting exploiting the mammiferous majesty of the black female cross bred with Aryan aspiration: - blonde hair and blue eyes tugs at perceptions of male fantasy and its satiation in pornography which reaches contextually to blaxploitation for its articulation. 'Popcorn Tits', a blare of hypnotic colour and ornamentation borrows from the wealth of textiles adorning the everyday of contemporary West African culture. Dutch wax prints, Floral Brocades, Laces and Voiles, which adorn the bosoms and backsides of the African Woman provide the vessel for a series of works from the Hypnotic greens of 'Geeta' 1995 to the virginal sacredness of 'Two Doo Voodoo'. Incidentally Ofilli homes in on items prominent

in the barter trade of slavery appropriated by West African coastal culture as to become inherent to them. 'Shithead' 1995 a grotesque sculpture consisting of a clump of Elephant dung adorned with dreadlocks and baby teeth provoke at different levels taunting and satiating the ethnographers appetite for mystic exotica on one hand, and setting in perspective the Victorian perceptions of Post Colonial West Africa. Where the symbology of the dreadlocked person implies insanity or votive possession by the otherworldly and thus residing out of societies bounds as against the perceptions of the 'Removed Caribbean' where it forms a valid part of contemporary culture.

Technically the paintings reveal a bloody-minded attitude which paradoxes the result in its light-heartedness. Essentially a collagist painter, Layers of resin and magazine cut-outs lend depth and prompt a multi-scalar dialogue with his narrative – clever, for the whole addresses 500 years of sometimes nasty cultural dialogue lightly. Provocative and sometimes obscene, the predominance of womanhood as central theme challenges perceptions of the black female as the oppressed gender;- hence the serene dignity of the maternal figure sits comfortably with the erotic depravity of Kings Cross. This duality, vocalised in the vocabulary of African American Gangsta Rap: - HO (whore), BEEATCH (Bitch) and YO MAMA (Your Mother) as espoused by NWA, ICE

CUBE & TUPAC SHAKUR, presents the black female as central to the continuity of this culture in her strength and sexuality.

On the whole the RCA graduates work can be described as obscene, provocative, delightful, erudite and deliberately ambiguous and very appealing in its blatant thrusting of potentially explosive socio-political and cultural issues referenced from the epicentre of empire.