

Art review: *Rites of Passage* at Gagosian, Britannia Street, London

14 APRIL 2023

Religion or spirituality is a focus of this work, *Jonathan Evens* finds



Nengi Omuku, Eden (2022), oil on sanyan

LET us say first that this is a fascinating exhibition, visually stunning as well as conceptually stimulating. Well curated in both its design and structure, it features 19 contemporary artists who share a history of migration. The underlying idea explored through the exhibition is that of the three stages of liminal space — separation, transition, and return — while also examining tradition, spirituality and space.

The entrance to the gallery and exhibition is marked by Elsa James's placemaking *Ode to David Lammy MP*, a black neon text that reads "I AM HERE BECAUSE YOU WERE THERE" and is placed high above the entrance. Lammy's words are a powerful affirmation of migration, which originates in his 2018 speech in response to the *Windrush* scandal. Many of James's works are black on black, as she demarcates black space within the collective mind-set and examines ideas surrounding regionality of race and black subjectivity.



"Rites of Passage", installation view

Recent and historic injustices rightly and inevitably feature strongly within this exhibition, but its principal focus is on the ability of ritual to sustain and enable those participating to survive and overcome trauma. Within this, religion or spirituality is a key focus — as a tool for both survival and oppression — and the majority of the artists selected engage consistently with the spiritual in their wider practice.

Nowhere is the paradoxical part played by religion more compellingly explored than in Victor Ehikhamenor's *Do This In Memory Of Us*, in which rosary beads and thread are combined with lace and canvas to create a schematic of a slave ship. This artefact has then been hung from the ceiling over mirrors placed on the floor which reflect the schematic.

The installation is completed by a soundscape that translates, for the first time ever, the hymn "Amazing Grace" from English into the Edo language of Ehikhamenor's native Benin Kingdom in Nigeria. The viewer is caught between the textile work above and its mirror image below, while being surrounded by the singing of "Amazing Grace", and is, therefore, immersed in the paradoxes and dilemmas raised by Ehikhamenor's work.



Adelaide Damoah, Ny?ma (Ten), 2023, Cyanotype, ink and gold on cotton rag paper, in two parts

Ehikhamenor grew up within a hybrid experience that juxtaposed Catholic ways of worship with the ancient traditional Benin ways of worship. In a similar way, his installation combines awareness of the ways in which, in the slave trade, Christianity was both the religion of the oppressor and the means by which many of its victims were enabled to survive within the oppression of slavery. This quality is written into every aspect of Ehikhamenor's installation, opening up contemplative space for sustained reflection on the complexities of how best to respond today to the horror and inhumanity of the slave trade, whether we have victim, oppressor, or other heritage.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, in works such as *Colonialist Revelry, an infection of mind, skin and being. Blackness hangs on, a determined survival*, Enam Gbewonyo investigates cultural history, identity, and womanhood through her pulling and stretching of textiles. Using her craft like a time machine, she pushes us to face the reality of a troubled history and the emotions that it brings to the fore to bring us to a point of spiritual awareness, personally and collectively.

With *Betwixt and Between Worlds*, Adelaide Damoah explores colonial history by transposing texts and maps on to photo-collages of herself and her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and great-great-grandmother, thereby contesting outdated ideologies imposed on her familial narrative. She works at the intersection of painting and performance within the context of colonialism, identity, sexuality, and spirituality.



Àsikò, Pillars at the Port (2022), giclée print on baryta paper

Photos from Àsikò's *Manifestations* series delve into the evolution of cultural mythology in the light of migration. He uses the iconography of Egun masquerades, which is rooted in Yoruba history and culture, to explore how representations of ancestral communities might change the form of contemporary diasporic identities in the UK. His varied photographic series explores the limits of femininity and masculinity, spirituality and beauty, our relationship with nature, and our understanding of a sense of self in the world.

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones also draws inspiration from his Yoruba ancestry and heritage in works that render bodies in motion through the patterns and shapes of connecting organic forms, shown principally in a vibrant single colour. In *Untitled (Reverse Dive)*, we see an abstract background of tessellating shapes and interlocking swaths of colour, with sinuous bodies emerging and dispersing into the lush, stylised foliage that proliferates on his canvas.

Drawing on inspiration from photographic archives, Manyaku Mashilo depicts scenes in which imaginary characters migrate through fantastical worlds between unknown places and rituals of shared belief. She has said that the titles of her work, such as *Dithapelo tša boMma — Kopano le Dinaledi*, from her *Celestial Cartographies* series, represent "verbs or actions which manifest between worlds". Her works are suggestions of "a spiritual journey towards a place of healing and acceptance".

Using oil paint on sanyan — a traditional Nigerian fabric — Nengi Omuku's work interrogates ambiguity and liminality with a focus on interior psychological spaces. In *Eden*, she alludes to the biblical paradise, composing using a vibrant, Fauvist palette and invoking a longing for pre-lapsarian tranquillity and oneness with nature. Having trained as a florist and horticulturalist, she is seeking reconnection with the natural world and the solace to be found there. This image also takes us on an allegorical journey from darkness into light, with our eye following the passage of figures across the utopian landscape.

The rites of passage which these artists explore enable them individually to navigate the experience of migration, but, as such rituals transcend cultural boundaries, their individual experience also becomes a collective communal experience, particularly in the context of this exhibition.

"Rites of Passage" is at the Gagosian Gallery, 6-24 Britannia Street, London WC1, until 29 April. Phone 020 7841 9960. gagosian.com

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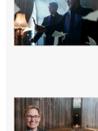
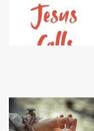
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