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Art

New Artist Spotlight: Nengi Omuku at Kasmin

Artsy Editorial

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Portrait of Nengi Omuku by Stephen Tayo, 2023. Courtesy of Kasmin.



Nengi Omuku, *Kwadwo I*, 2022. Photo by Mark Blower. Courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami.

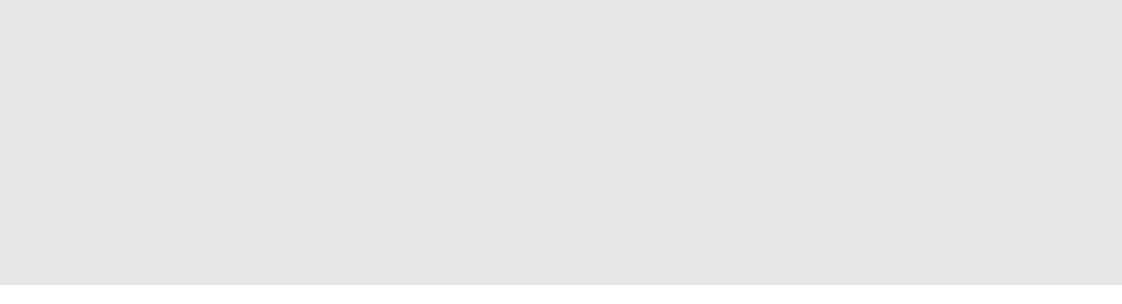
*“New Artist Spotlight” is a recurring editorial series featuring artists who have recently joined the rosters of Artsy’s gallery partners.*

Idyllic and unnerving; still, yet pulsating with movement; intimate, yet impersonal. These are the tensions that shroud Nigerian-born and -based Nengi Omuku’s abstract figurative paintings of people lounging in domestic spaces. The artist, who is currently represented by Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery and London-based Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, has also recently joined the roster of New York-based Kasmin, which will debut her solo show in September of 2024. Omuku’s work will be featured in “Aso oke: Prestige Cloth from Nigeria” at the Saint Louis Art Museum in Missouri this September.

Relying on either a physical sitter or archival photography, Omuku’s paintings erase the specificities of her subjects, while retaining the expressions or clothes that capture their essence. Painted onto *sanyan*, the Nigerian textile for draped clothing, Omuku’s works omit markers of specific identity (like faces), to broaden the idea of what an identity-based work looks like.



Nengi Omuku, *Reclining Figures*, 2022. Courtesy of The Baltimore Museum of Art.



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“[Omuku] has developed a visual language that expands on the vocabulary of both contemporary painting and historical Nigerian textile traditions, resulting in work that is completely captivating and transportive,” Nick Olney, the president of Kasmin, told Artsy. By locating her subjects in domestic settings, Omuku invites a reconsideration of the borders between public and private, an invisible line that often shapes how work by artists of color is perceived.

Omuku’s artistic practice is influenced by her time at the Slade School of Fine Art at University College, London, where she received both her BA and MA. At Slade, Omuku studied the traditional use of oil painting for both landscapes and portraiture that were popularized during the British Romantic period.



Nengi Omuku, *The Lighthouse*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.

Romanticism bleeds into the composition of Omuku’s paintings, with their characteristic depictions of people experiencing fervent emotions or the mysticism of nature. This can be seen in the painting *Kwadwo I* (2022), where a despondent individual faces the city from a balcony with his back to us, evoking the composition of Caspar David Friedrich’s 1818 painting *The Wanderer Above the Sea Fog*.

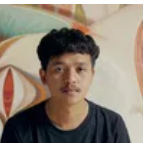
Omuku’s work creates a tension between a classical British style of painting on an “unconventional” material to reference the history of British imperialism in Nigeria. Rather than narrating specific historical tales of that period, her work tracks its influence by portraying how people of color navigate hostile environments.

Olney further added, “She’s very clearly a rising star and we’re thrilled to expand the recognition of her work both in the United States and beyond. It’s a privilege to be welcoming her to Kasmin’s growing roster of artists.” ■

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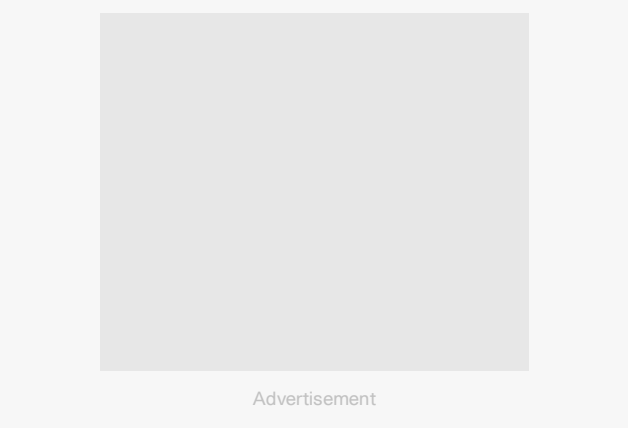
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