**Of Selfies and Shadow play: Osi Audu’s Self-Portrait**

Osi Audu has the astute ability to break down complex ideas into simplified, visually appealing compositions. He has developed a unique vocabulary that emphasizes geometry, volume, tactility, and quality of the tromp l’oeil, in a career that spans nearly thirty years. Though on flat surface, his work appears three-dimensional. Solid black forms dominate the center of the picture plane. Some cast reverent shadows that taper to the edges of the paper or canvas. With voluminous architectural shapes composed of different parts but bound seamlessly by slick white lines in the new Self-Portrait series, Audu stretches the boundaries of abstraction, teasing the imagination. There is clarity of form that immediately casts a spell on the viewer. Yet Audu’s work does not give in to pedestrian interpretation. One must first acquaint oneself with the philosophy that informs his creative disposition in order to have a more meaningful encounter with the body of work. Though minimalist abstraction is a principal motivation, it is not abstraction for mere sake nor is the dualism (solids and shadows, black and grey) that is apparent in his oeuvre a mere visual device or creative flair. Both are conceptual armatures that help to advance an artistic position and the culturally-derived epistemology that grounds his work.

Audu’s aesthetics draws specifically upon the Yoruba ontology of dual consciousness centered on the human head. The head (ori) is a bifurcated ensemble that best represents the intertwining of spirit and matter, mind and body. Orí inú (invisible or inner head) is the locus of consciousness, an a priori that gives substance to being. Orí òde (outer or tangible head), the physical manifestation of consciousness, is a vehicle of perception, identity, and interaction with reality. It is this dialogic imagining of beingness, of the human self, that Audu translates on white paper and canvas, using black pastel, graphite, primary colors, wool, among other media. His use of black monochrome holds pertinent symbolic value. It ramifies the cultural vicissitudes of blackness as well as outlines Audu’s position of engagement in an art world that is burdened by a historical legacy of excluding or delegitimizing black artists who claim the arcane language of abstraction.

In previous solo exhibitions at Skoto Gallery such as Osi Audu: Ile Ori/Ori Ile (House of the Head/Head of the House) in 2006, the head is addressed as a metaphor of collective consciousness. Audu explores the head as a cognitive altar that dictates the cycle of life and human responses to existential conditions. Conversely, the current exhibition titled New Portraits: Self in the Global Age focuses on the autonomous self, shifting emphasis from collective consciousness to the singular being as unit of sensation. It comprises of eighteen works from the ongoing Self-Portrait series. They push Audu’s fastidious formalism, complex forms, and geometric abstraction further albeit in a different direction. Conceptually, one might speak of them as selfies, those totems that feed the narcissist cult of the individual, very symptomatic of our contemporary world.

Yet we are admonished not to think of the works as portraits in a physiognomic sense. Instead, they are reflections on the ways in which the individual negotiates his/her being in the world. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, they are the artist’s attempts to distill perception, by relating and piecing together the spectacles of his own world in relation to the world at large. It is the interior-self that forms the basis of rootedness; the source of identity and personhood. As such, Audu casts his gaze inward, to his Orí inú, the seat of consciousness where memories also reside; reconciling it with his Orí òde, the vessel that bears out his past and present experiences, of growing up and studying in Nigeria, living in the United Kingdom, and current domicile in New York. Altogether, the works capture Audu’s attempt to find himself in a teleological world that is mediated by relations. Ultimately, what lies at the core of this new body of work is a phenomenological awareness of being part of a globalized reality, marked by changing conditions, cultural exchanges on a planetary scale, and a network of disjunctive and constitutive references.

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