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Oluwatobi Adewumi  
Journeys of Belonging  
Von Lintel Gallery  
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by Jody Zellen



Oluwatobi Adewumi is a Nigeria-born artist who now resides in McNeil, Arkansas. He immigrated to the U.S. after completing a degree in computer science in Nigeria. Though mostly self-taught as an artist, Adewumi is extremely skillful and perceptive. His representational works are beautiful and compassionate portraits of friends and acquaintances that trace their journeys, as well as the cultural struggles they faced as Black immigrants. The portraits are more of an investigation into people, personalities and the stories he was told, than about a specific place or time.

In his artist's statement, Adewumi speaks of his interest in providing both the history and the present situations of the people he depicts. While the works are quasi-political and explore issues of race, they are more referential and poetic than didactic. His subjects are often people who have been marginalized and through his depictions he returns their voices. The underlying motivation in his practice is an exploration of what it means to be black — be it in Nigeria or in Arkansas. Adewumi states in a recent interview published in the *Arkansas Art Scene Blog*, "My art takes on reconstructing lost stories, documenting the ideals of our history. I want to challenge stereotypes and myths that have been crafted by others."

As a draftsman, Adewumi has a deft hand, and his realistic drawings depict his subjects in exacting detail. Many of the portraits are in three-quarter view with their bodies turned to the side while they gaze in that direction or back toward the viewer. The portraits are a combination of charcoal, acrylic and collage on paper or canvas, and though Adewumi begins with a realistic representation, he obfuscates the image through the addition of vertical stripes that create a veil through which sitter is seen. These stripes — in lighter or darker grays, as well as subtle sepias — might reference the American flag and/or prison bars.

Two related sets of works are featured in the exhibition. In the back space are the images *Don't Stop the Freedom*, *Prejudice*, *Wrinkled on Purpose* and *After All* (all works 2024). In these pieces, the “stripes” are more subtle, and meld with the subject’s skin. The person depicted in each portrait is shirtless (shirts are a major component in many of the other works). The only bodily adornments are placed below the ear like dangling earrings that juxtapose sales tags and political stickers with small red, white and blue American flags. Adewumi titles these pieces after the texts in the tags and stickers to direct the interpretation. For example, in *Don't Stop the Freedom*, a rendering of a small stop sign that states “Don't Stop” is combined with one that exclaims “Freedom of Movement.” Both cover the flag. The image becomes a jarring portrait confronting both racism and patriotism.

In many of the other portraits, either on paper or canvas, Adewumi focuses on what surrounds the subject. In *Crisscross*, he creates a hoodie by collaging a page from a faded, red hued newspaper that prominently displays the text “Criss-Crossed” over the head and shoulders of a bearded man. He draws red and black lines within the hoodie in a plaid pattern. Charcoal silhouettes extend across the shoulder and into the face of the man. He gazes out past the edge of the composition, unaffected by the striped augmentation to his face and wardrobe. In *Where it all Started*, he also presents a realistic and tender rendering of his subject. Here, a Black man depicted from the top of his head to just below the shoulders fills the composition. He appears pensive, his thumb resting just under his chin. His shirt is a collage of newspaper headlines where words including WARS, GRAND, WHO, FIGHTS are given prominence in combination with articles adorned by circles and hand written notes.

Half of the woman’s face in *The Time Will Come* is covered by a striped collage of floral motifs, silhouettes and newspaper fragments. The photorealistic qualities of the face contrast with the abstraction below, turning the portrait into something more than a direct representation. Adewumi could easily just present beautifully rendered portraits of his community that celebrate the delicate features and intense gazes of his subjects, but these works are more than that. He alters the surface of his images by imposing stripes on his subject’s skin or turning their garments into collages. The newspaper imagery, as well as the patterned clothing can sign for both the sitter’s thoughts or inner life, as well as the urgency of past and current events. These unique and enigmatic works blend realism and collage in an attempt to present and celebrate the inner truth of the sitters.

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