Toyin Ojih Odutola centers myth-making through visual language, inspiring reflection on the power inherent in shaping narratives. Ojih Odutola’s drawings feature dense, complex mark-making done primarily in pen, charcoal, and pastel that invite the viewer into vivid realms of her own creation. Mining the process of identity formation and the possibilities of radical imagination through form, her portraits are at once real and imaginary.

Ojih Odutola’s most recent body of work imagines an ancient civilization set in Plateau State, central Nigeria. Each drawing presents a detailed chronicling of the social and cultural strata of a fictional nation dominated by the Eshu—an all-female ruling elite—who manufacture and subjugate male humanoids for mining and food cultivation. The first stirrings of this narrative series began formulating for Ojih Odutola after reading Octavia Butler’s Patternmaster (1976) at nineteen. Though it was a chance encounter with German anthropologist Leo Frobenius’ crafted mythology of an “African Atlantis,” that was the spark necessary for the work to take form. This fictitious analysis and a recent geological survey on central Nigerian rock formations became fertile breeding ground for Ojih Odutola’s countervailing narrative of radical visual reversals that offer space for reflection on gender, power, hierarchies, oppression, and imperialism. A Countervailing Theory wrestles with the implications of power and systemic oppression working conjunctively, highlighting the faults in enabling systems and the failures in the infrastructure central to society.

In the drawing Waiting on Assignments (2019) the viewer is confronted by two Eshu, the first and most prominent standing in the foreground in profile, gazing back with an expression that vacillates between arrogance and boredom. In her left hand, she grips a lowered spear with an easy confidence that speaks to innate handling. There is mastery in that gaze, an assured understanding of self and the space occupied. She waits before another, half enshrouded by her body, who stands more expectantly alert in a helmeted mask made of an intricately interlocking material, spear at the ready. Defined musculature undulates beneath their skin, the subtle rippling a mirror to the harsher geometric shapes of the natural environment surrounding them. The drawings of A Countervailing Theory are all monochromatic, composed on black painted gesso linen in a purposeful inverse of Ojih Odutola’s usual working style. Initially an additional experiment in constructed opposites, the restricted black and white palette becomes the perfect vehicle to highlight each delineated line and curve.

For Ojih Odutola her work is about engaging with potential, allowing the viewer the critical imaginative power of the alternative. When asked why she often frames herself as a neutral translator for her work rather than a creator, the artist has said, “I’m trying to say that as an artist, my role is to help you see beyond the confines of a limited set of meanings and explore a wider array.”

-Keshia Turley, Curatorial Assistant
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