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Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me

By

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Abstract

Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me is a photographic project examining identity construction on an individual, society, and cosmological level. It is a response to racial limitations and judgements thrust upon the African diaspora. I reimagine my identity through Afrofuturism by intersecting cosmology, philosophy, and spirituality. Using digital technology, I composite photographs to create new landscapes and self-portraits. The landscapes are my vision of the promised land; the ground references the physical world, the sky becomes a canvas for projection and imagination, and the horizon acts as a symbol for the liminal space between the physical and ethereal. The portraits introduce a new way to envision my Black identity through the power of the universe. The theoretical concept of liquid blackness allows Blackness to be as fluid and unbounded as the cosmos. I construct a space where Blackness is immanent and expansive, using the Yoruba cosmological concept of *ase* and connecting it to the idea of dark matter; the force that holds the universe together. I look beyond the separation and limitation that occurs in racial stereotyping, positing that identity is more complex than just our physical representation.

Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me

Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me is a photographic project that creates an immeasurable space where I visualize identity in its multiplicity. In this project I manipulate photographs to imagine new worlds and reimagine my identity. The work is inspired by Afrofuturism, which envisions the Black identity through science-fiction, mysticism, and technology. Rising from these ideas, I position the work at the intersection of cosmology, philosophy, and spirituality.

The title of the project is inspired by the biblical book, Song of Solomon (1:6) where it states, “Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me.” I am a Black man, but that is not all that I am. I use this passage to also reference the sun’s ability to darken skin, its light animating life and form, and as a celestial body praised by multiple cultures.



Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me, 2020 (22"x28", archival inkjet print)

Though my mother raised my siblings and I in the Christian church, there was room for other kinds of spiritual understanding in our home. My mother used Christianity as a foundation, but built her own personal spiritual journey; she observed herself in relation to a divine being. As I grew older, I began to build my own path to spirituality by examining my relationship to the world and the divine. I started questioning the dualism of western vs. eastern spiritual ideas. I wanted to know how everything connected. Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh's idea of interbeing is one way in which I sought to understand the world. Interbeing understands the world without separation, self cannot exist alone, all things coalesce to help the other exist.¹ The self is within nature, its symbiotic relationship extends from the microcosm to the macrocosm.



Interbeing, 2020 (22"x28", archival inkjet print)

¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Awakening of the Heart: Essential Buddhist Sutras and Commentaries* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2012), 155, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rit/detail.action?docID=869202>.

As a child, I always enjoyed being in nature's presence. Growing up in western Washington I explored the wonders of the outdoors. My siblings and I would go on adventures through the woods and pretend we were explorers of new worlds. This experience cultivated a deep curiosity for nature and the mysteries of the universe. *Upward* is a depiction of this experience being within nature, forever peering into the sky for meaning and connection to something larger than myself. Spirituality and nature spurred me to see the world as more than just matter. I began to see the world as a blank canvas, a surface on which I can project, create, and reimagine what I see.



Upward, 2019 (20"x20", archival inkjet print)

To produce the images in *Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me*, I use a process similar to combination printing, which was used in the mid to late-19th century. Early photographic processes had technical limitations. It was unable to render detail for both land and sky in one negative. 19th century French photographer Gustave Le Gray combined multiple

negatives/exposures (clouds, land, and sea) to achieve a balanced print. Early photographs were often used for science, but there were photographers who saw potential for their artistic use, more closely in line with painting at the time. In 1857 Oscar G. Rejlander created *The Two Ways of Life*, an allegorical and artistic image combining around 30 negatives to create one print.² In the 1960s, American photographer Jerry Uelsmann imaginatively revolutionized the practice. Uelsmann understood photography as a way to explore the psyche. From his perspective, photographs act as metaphors. His images are not meant to show us reality or objective truths about the external world.³ Similarly, I produce composite photographs to explore the mind in relation to external space.

Photography's indexical nature links my work to a physical reality, while its malleability allows me to enact my will on the image and bend it to my needs. Similar to a painter applying layers of paint to a canvas, I build layers of images in Photoshop. In *New Horizons*, I merged multiple images of sky and land to create an open world for self-projection. Just as Le Grey, Rejlander, and Uelsmann overlaid images to depict their vision of the world, I combine and manipulate images to visually express what exists in my mind. The end result is an amalgamation of places, realities, and times. Sky, ground, and horizon act as metaphors. The ground references the physical world, the sky becomes a canvas for projection and imagination, and the horizon acts as a symbol for the liminal space between the physical and ethereal.

² Dino A. Brugioni, *Photo Fakery: The History and Techniques of Photographic Deception and Manipulation*, 1st ed (Dulles: Brassey's, 1999), 28.

³ Scott Erickson, *Jerry & Maggie: This Is Not Photography*, Documentary, Biography, 2012.



New Horizons, 2019 (24"x30", archival inkjet print)

Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me is also a response to the stigmas of racial labelling. As a Black American, I have been judged because of my skin color. I remember a fellow grade school student saying, "you're stupid because you're Black." This is one of many statements that made me feel isolated. I began to seek out ways to escape these harsh realities, taking to nature as my sanctuary, where I felt free from these judgements. These experiences prompted me to think about how to restructure my identity, and I began to visualize the self as more than just physical. *Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me* expresses a shift from a negative state of isolation to a positive one of solitude, from a point of separation to deep connection. My personal trauma led me in search of a promised land, where I could find myself after being broken by society.



Selah, 2020 (20"x20", archival inkjet print)

Former slaves and their descendants in the United States sought ways to build a better life after emancipation. They did so through religious and spiritual means such as Ethiopianism. African Americans were introduced to the idea through Bishop Turner and the African Methodist Episcopal Church.⁴ Ethiopianism rose out of southern Africa in the late 18th century in response to European colonization and to regain sovereignty in each respective African community; calling for political and religious freedom from European rule. Ethiopianism was inspired by African ministers breaking away from Anglican and Methodist churches. The founder of the Ethiopian Church of South African, Mangena Mokone, was the first to use the term, using Ethiopia to represent the movement because of Ethiopia's ability to maintain control of the country in light of European colonization. In 1896, Ethiopia defeated the Italian colonizers in the

⁴ Edwin S. Redkey, "Bishop Turner's African Dream," *The Journal of American History* 54, no. 2 (1967): 288–90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1894806>.

Battle of Adwa, which empowered other African nations. The phrase “Africa for Africans,” often featured in Mokone’s sermons, expressed the fact that African nations did not need European rule in order to advance their own political and/or spiritual agendas.⁵ Ethiopians’ ability to govern themselves was proof that other African nations and their descendants could do the same.

The biblical passage “Princes shall come out of Egypt: Ethiopia shall soon stretch her hands unto God” (Psalms 68:31) refers to Ethiopia’s biblical status as being the promised land; a passage symbolizing Ethiopia as the land of milk and honey. Ethiopianism provided a way to envision an imaginary world, through a real place, where the African diasporic community could be free. No longer would they be oppressed, beaten, and killed. This movement provided a foundation for the conception of Afrofuturism and a way for the African diaspora to return to its origins.

Afrofuturism is a cultural movement that imagines a future where the African diaspora can thrive. The term was coined in the early 1990s by cultural critic Mark Dery in his essay, “Black to the Future.” Dery was interested in the connection between science fiction and the African diaspora, paralleling the removal of Africans from their homeland with alien abductions commonly found in science fiction narratives.⁶ It is a cultural and aesthetic movement that creates a space where Blackness can be explored expansively. Imagination and transformation are foundational to the idea of Afrofuturism.⁷

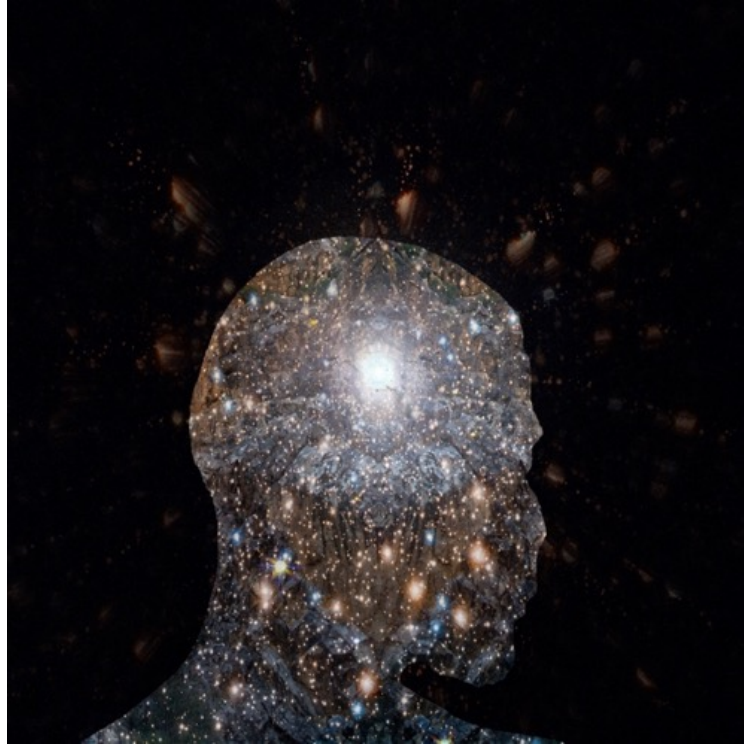
⁵ Rugare Rukuni, Erna Oliver, “Africanism, Apocalypticism, Jihad and Jesuitism: Prelude to Ethiopianism,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies; Pretoria* 75, no. 3 (2019): 2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i3.5384>.

⁶ Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (1993): 180.

⁷ Ytasha Womack, “Project Imagination,” in *Afrofuturism the World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 42, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10764437>.

Afrofuturism is in response to the brutal reality that Africans and their descendants have endured and continue to face. Tomi Adeyemi, a Nigerian-American novelist, approaches our struggle freely in her book, *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). Adeyemi explores race through a fictional world inspired by Yoruba culture. The story pits two classes of people, the *kosidán* (common citizen), who are not connected to magic and the *maji*, who are gifted with magic and darker skin, against each other. The *maji* and their descendants are mistreated and are often referred to as maggots by the *kosidán*. The *kosidán* fear the *maji*'s abilities and use violence to displace them. Through African myth and storytelling, Adeyemi creates an empowering platform for resistance and freedom. The *maji* draw their magical gifts from *ase*. In Yoruba culture, *ase* can be understood as the “vital force or power that enables the sun to shine, the moon and stars to glitter, the wind to blow, the rain to fall, and rivers to flow; it gives form to the formless, motion to the motionless, and life to living things... This power sustains the cosmos.”⁸ By providing the *maji* with the gift of *ase*, Adeyemi shows the power and beauty of Blackness, situating at the apex of creation.

⁸ Babatunde Lawal., “Ayél’ Ojà; Òrunn’ile: Imaging and Performing Yoruba Cosmology,” in *African Cosmos: Stellar Arts* (Washington, D.C.: New York: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution; Monacelli Press, 2012), 219.



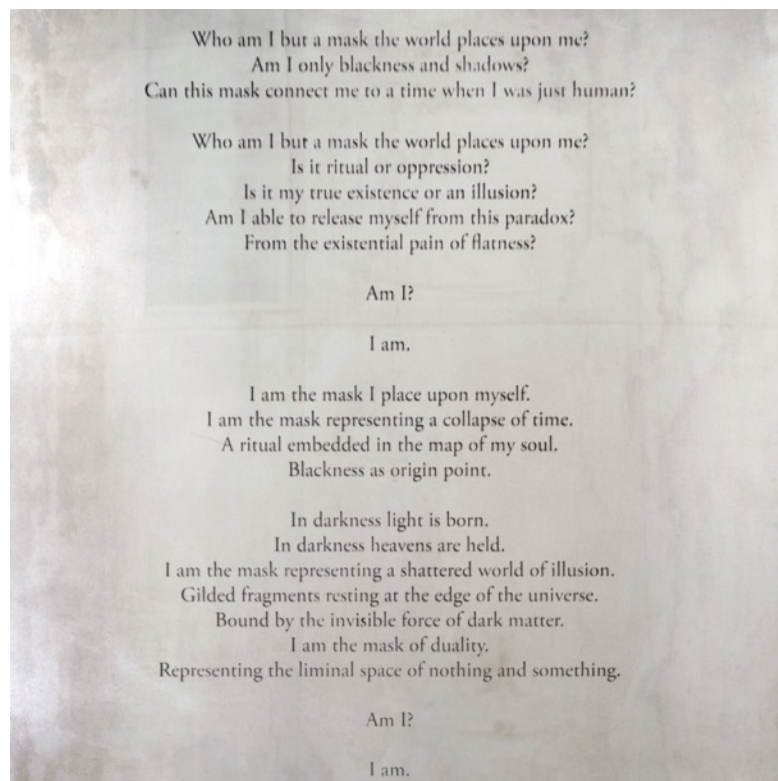
Ori, 2019 (30"x30", archival inkjet print)

Ori is inspired by this concept of *ase*, the power that Adeyemi uses to fuel the gifts of the maji. In Yoruba cosmology, the head (*ori*) is associated with the Eternal One (Olódùmarè).⁹ Using my body as a vessel, I construct an imaginary space where this power is visualized as the cosmos. The stories of Black Americans usually begin with slavery, but I want to go further back than that. In *Ori*, I connect the Black body to the source of all creation, which is speculated to come from the head of the cosmos, the Eternal One; Olódùmarè. Entering into this imaginary world is not an act of transcendence but an act of immanence; it is not about going beyond the self, but merging with all that exists. Transcendence is understood as a binary relation calling for separation between the self and the world. Immanence is a concept imagining existence as a totality, it seeks “to overcome the dualism of subject and object.”¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze examined

⁹ Lawal, “Ayél’ Ojà; Òrunn’ile: Imaging and Performing Yoruba Cosmology,” 224.

¹⁰ Miguel de Beistegui, *Immanence - Deleuze and Philosophy: Deleuze and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 15, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rit/detail.action?docID=1962193>.

immanence as the plane of thought. This plane is both behind and ahead, foreground and background.¹¹ The plane of immanence is the totality of life, similar to the idea of *ase* being the force that brings everything into existence. The space of immanence leads me to construct identity beyond labels and predetermined concepts developed by society. These concepts (*ase* and immanence) open up opportunities to explore the self in relation to the whole of existence; illusions of race and its power of separation is destroyed, making way for clarity and hope to form in its absence.



Am I? I Am., 2020 (19"x19", steel, acrylic sheet, screenprint)

I recall a conversation with my sister where she told me, "It wasn't until I left home and entered the world that I realized I am Black." I never thought about it that way, but I too shared in that experience. Of course, we know our skin is brown, but it never defined us. We did not

¹¹ de Beistegui, *Immanence - Deleuze and Philosophy*, 11-12.

grow up thinking that race had any real significance to who we are, but the world did, and we had to accept it. This disconnect between how the world sees me and how I see myself is confusing. How do I break down the barriers that society places around me? Can I choose to be who I want, or am I subjected to the judgments of others? *Am I? I Am.* is a poem that I wrote to express my struggle with questioning and reaffirming who I am versus who the world says I should be. I ask these questions for the ones who cannot.

The constructs of race are destructive. One of its intended uses was to control entire populations, granting colonizers with a pseudo-scientific tool for oppression, justifying the atrocities committed against Africans and their descendants.¹² Racial categorization was established in the late 17th-century by French physician Francois Bernier in his essay “A New Division of Earth”. This categorization of people shifts and changes throughout time. Racial categorization has changed, but the concept of race has not. Bernier categorizes people into Lapps, Negroid, Europeans, and Far Easterners.¹³ 18th century German physiologist, anthropologist, and physician Johann Friedrich Blumenbach created the racial categories with which we are familiar; Caucasian (white), Mongolian (yellow), Negroid (Black), and American (red).¹⁴ In the 21st century, we still use racial categories such as Black, White, Hispanic, Asian etc., to identify ourselves. Racial categorization thus determines who we become, creating the framework for a false sense of identity.

Lorna Simpson is an American photographer who has dealt with the complexity of her work being reduced to concepts of racial identity. Simpson’s portraits showcasing women of color are usually seen as a commentary on the experience of Black women. In response to her

¹² F. Carl Walton and Stephen M. Caliendo, “Origins of the Concepts of Race,” in *The Routledge Companion to Race and Ethnicity*, by Stephen M. Caliendo and Charlton D. Mcllwain (London: Routledge, 2010), 5.

¹³ Walton and Caliendo, “Origins of the Concepts of Race,” 3

¹⁴ Walton and Caliendo, “Origins of the Concepts of Race,” 3

work being overly discussed around the body, race, and gender, Simpson decided to remove the identity of her subjects between the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁵ By obscuring her subject's faces, and therefore their identity, Simpson engages those who view her work more conceptually and allows it to expand beyond notions of racial identity. Simpson states in her interview with Thelma Golden that she hopes people won't approach her work and say, "Oh they're Black!" Simpson's work does not focus on racial identity; rather, she explores how "culture shapes our interactions, experiences, and relationships in contemporary America."¹⁶ Her use of body language and text begin to speak the everyday encounters that Black Americans experience. The racialized reading of the work comes mostly from the viewer, not the narratives she sets up. Many Black artists experience this phenomenon, each working to address Blackness in their own authentic way.

Kehinde Wiley creates paintings directly related to issues of racial representation. Wiley acknowledges the erasure of Black men within the western art historical canon and the cultural and historical context that shapes it. Wiley responds to this erasure by bringing the contemporary Black male into the previously racially exclusive spaces of representation, putting him front and center. The paintings depict Black men in poses assumed by white sitters in Old Master paintings, "the big bosses of the Old World."¹⁷

As a Black self-portraitist, I struggle with the ideas of representation. Lorna Simpson's reluctance to have her work viewed from a perspective of race resonates with me; it is a reductive, dismissive, and shallow point of view. At the same time, I feel uncomfortable

¹⁵ *Representing the Black Body: Lorna Simpson in Conversation with Thelma Golden*, March 17, 2017, http://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/representing-the-black-body-lorna-simpson-in-conversation-with-thelma-golden.

¹⁶ "Lorna Simpson: Five Day Forecast," *Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden | Smithsonian* (blog), accessed February 23, 2020, <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/explore/lorna-simpson-five-day-forecast/>.

¹⁷ "Kehinde Wiley Studio | Brooklyn, NY," accessed November 25, 2019, <http://kehindewiley.com/>.

removing my body from my work because it feels as though I am playing into the erasure of Blackness. For Wiley, proper representation of the fluidity within Black masculinity is important and necessary. While I agree with his position; I do not want to be limited to the representation of race. What this leaves me with is the battle between succumbing to the pressures of racial politics or removing the Black self to avoid such issues. I operate within the liminal space of obligation and freedom. Similar to Simpson, I obscure my identity by use of silhouettes and repurposing the body to act as a vessel for projection. The body, however, remains at the center of these portraits, just as Wiley's portraits of Black men. As I explore these channels of representation, I question how I to speak about the idea of a boundless identity while acknowledging the restrictive forces of society, such as racial stereotyping and judgments. The constructed landscapes are where I can exist mentally. These new worlds allow me the space to explore the paradox between two opposing ideals. I envision a future where I can create an image of myself or any person of color, without the first thought being about racial identity. I move beyond the pressures of society by placing myself, as a Black man, into the space of cosmology, attempting to understand my origins, beyond the history of slavery. Within this space, my Blackness is no longer bound to or defined by American racial stereotypes; it is connected to the vast, expansive, and eternal nature of the cosmos.

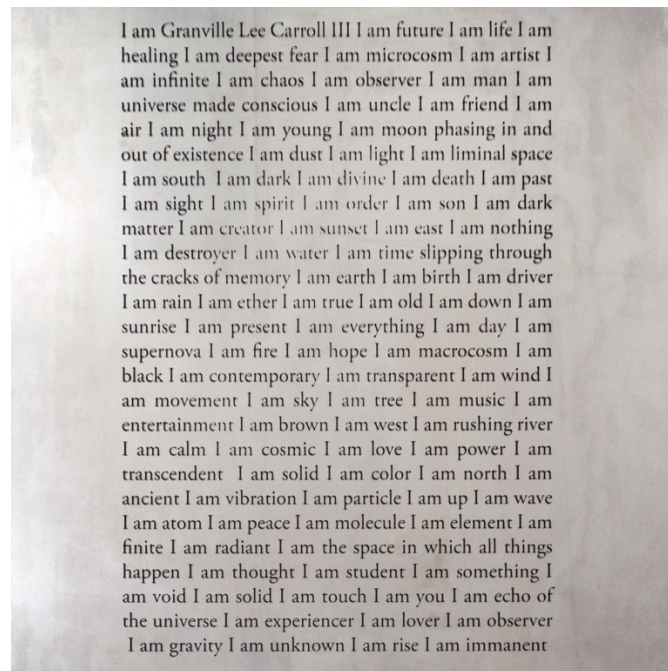


Black Universe, 2020 (20"x20", archival inkjet print)

Alessandra Raengo helped develop the theoretical concept that Blackness is fluid, referring to it as “liquid blackness.” The construction of race through the senses, making it tangible and experienced, was imperative for whites to solidify stereotypes against Africans and their descendants.¹⁸ This helped justify the stereotyping and racially-based violence experienced by those in the African diaspora and their descendants. Each person, by their own definition of Blackness, adds to the conversation of racial construction by their sensorial expressions of it. Raengo recontextualizes the sensorial experiences in many ways, three in which I find a direct connection to my work: unboundedness, vibration, and formlessness. Unboundedness is defined as being widespread and uncontainable, life blooms through the vigor and vibration of dark matter, and formlessness identifies blackness as filling all available space, taking on endless

¹⁸ Alessandra Raengo, “Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity,” *Liquid Blackness*, April 2014, 5-6, <http://liquidblackness.com/LB2.pdf>. Raengo.

forms.¹⁹ I visualize the unbounded, vibratory, and formless nature of Blackness to be imaginative, bold, heroic, and immanent to life. I construct metaphorical images relating to the deeper layers of my own identity and what it means to remove the body from the physical world of matter. The power of Blackness is parallel to the cosmos, conjuring the creative and destructive forces that exist in space. Blackness is the dark matter holding the universe together, returning us back to the source, to *ase* and immanence. Blackness refers to the transit of planets across their stars becoming silhouettes. The plane of thought is a place where I want Blackness to exist; in that space, Blackness will always be limitless.



I am, 2020 (19"x19", steel, acrylic sheet, screenprint)

India Arie is a soul and R&B musician also exploring the way Blackness is beautiful and strong. In Arie's album *Songversation: Medicine*, the song "I am Light" expands on the notion of Blackness. The lyrics tell a beautiful story, affirming that she is not what the world says she is;

¹⁹ Alessandra Raengo, "Liquid Blackness: A Research Project on Blackness and Aesthetics," *Liquid Blackness*, February 12, 2019, <http://liquidblackness.com/lb-original-about-page/>.

she is not the pain she has endured, the color of her eyes, or her race. She reaffirms through the song that she is light, that she is part of the divine creation of the universe. Arie's music is introspective and helps cultivate a new mindset on how we view ourselves.

Out of Nothing is a piece that was inspired by "I am light." It is a composite figure made up of my body, only the edges of light bringing my form into existence. This composite image was then laser cut into paper and backlit using LED lights to enliven the body and form. It explores this idea that the body is only a vessel, and that we are energetic beings of light, connected to the depths of the cosmos and the divine. *Out of Nothing* was also inspired by *Children of Blood and Bone*. During an encounter with the *kosidán*, Zelie, the main character, met a sacred priest named Oliamilekan (Lekan). Lekan is described as having tattoos or markings that glowed brilliantly white when his *ase* (power) was enacted. *Out of Nothing* is representative of the power of *ase* and its ability to bring form into existence.



Out of Nothing, 2019 (22"x28", laser-cut paper, LED)

Mikael Owunna, a Nigerian-Swedish artist, examines the way Black bodies have been represented in society and history. In his body of work, *Infinite Essence*, Owunna was inspired by Nigerian novelist, poet, and critic Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) who makes a connection between Chukwu, the Igbo supreme deity, and the sun. Achebe sees the sun's rays as a divine gift given by Chukwu to each individual.²⁰ Inspired by this story, Owunna then projected UV light onto his subjects to illuminate them, splattering their skin with fluorescent paint, and photographing them on a black background. The skin of the subjects in his photographs glow brilliantly and reference the beauty and magic within the cosmos.²¹ The return to ancient cosmology was prompted by Owunna's desire to explore contemporary issues related to race and representation by redefining the Black body. Seeing these images, I recall memories of imagining myself amongst the stars.

As a young boy, I spent countless nights outside my home looking up at the sky and projecting my imagination on the star-painted canvas. As I have grown older, the magic of the night sky has stayed with me. I get absorbed by its expansiveness and its gleaming and enchanting beauty. As much as I learn and understand about the cosmos, I am still enthralled by its power and mystery. South African artist Marcus Neustetter explained how it is not the answer that he seeks to articulate, but rather the question itself.²² Similarly, I wish to articulate questioning of the unknown through my artistic practice. The cosmos is the space where I can contemplate these questions and explore their infinite possibilities.

²⁰ Becky Harlan, "Every Black Person Deserves To See Themselves This Way," NPR.org, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2019/03/03/696969592/transforming-the-pain-of-black-lives-lost-into-portraits-of-magic-embodied>.

²¹ Becky Harlan, "Every Black Person Deserves To See Themselves This Way."

²² Marcus Neustetter and Erin L. Haney., "Chasing Light," in *African Cosmos: Stellar Arts* (Washington, D.C. : New York: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution ; Monacelli Press, 2012), 330–31.

At the core of this body of work is the expansion of selfhood and how we choose to define ourselves. Racial stereotypes and judgments hinder our understanding of who we are. I connect Blackness to the Yoruba tradition of *ase*, dark matter, and the concept of immanence. At first glance they may seem separate, but they all speak to a similar idea. There is an invisible force that permeates all of existence, this force cannot be separated from itself, it is in everything and nothing. Blackness is often attributed to the idea of being nothing, a void, fearful, and the unknown. Liquid blackness teaches us that Blackness is not singular, it is fluid and all encompassing. By intersecting myth, science, and philosophy, I begin to reorganize my world and formulate new ways of navigating the future. I want to reduce the idea of separateness that is a result of labelling and categorization. *Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me* introduces a new way to perceive Blackness as it continues to permeate everything in existence.



Our Deepest Fear, 2019 (24"x30", archival inkjet print)

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