

# HYPERALLERGIC

## An Abstract Painter Defines a Space of His Own

In his clashing compositions and use of artificial colors and materials Odita generates something very different from artists associated with geometric abstraction and Minimalism.

by **John Yau**  
October 3, 2020



Odili Donald Odita, "Another Space" (2019), acrylic on canvas, 84 x 108 inches (© Odili Donald Odita, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

In a 2009 interview with Ian Sternthal, publisher of Sternthal Books, Odili Donald Odita made the following statement about his work:

*The paintings you referred to do indeed incorporate a triangular geometric formation that is African in origin and conceptual in intention. A triangular block of color starts from one point, incrementally expanding as it reaches the other end of the canvas. The motif expresses the mathematics of infinity — two lines that never really touch, expand-*

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*ing towards infinity and beyond. [...] The triangular shapes stacked above and below, constantly repeating. This idea came to me from staring at the computer screen, as well as the cinematic screen. [...] This idea of the edge and beyond — the edge and within — was something that I began applying towards my understanding of the Western world's boundaries, in relation to the surrounding "peripheral" areas.*

In this statement, Odita connects a geometric shape that originates in Africa with the mathematical conception of infinity, the digital screen, and a Eurocentric conception of what is central and peripheral in importance.

The fluidity of Odita's expansive thinking runs counter to the reductive conceptual models employed by artists he has often been associated with, from Frank Stella to Kenneth Noland to Peter Halley. His inclusive approach extends to his palette, about which he has said: "In my process, I cannot make a color twice — it can only appear to be the same."



Odili Donald Odita, "Echo" (2019), acrylic latex paint on aluminum-core fabricated wood panel with reconstituted wood veneer, 92 x 52 x 1 3/4 inches (© Odili Donald Odita, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

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The cacophonously colored, interlocking, scalene triangles one sees in many of the paintings in Odita's current exhibition, *Odili Donald Odita: Mirror* at Jack Shainman Gallery (September 10–October 31) reflect his statement as they encompass this African form, found in textiles and on painted clay walls of homes in West Africa, along with the accelerated motion of hyperspace, past, and future.

This imaginative melding draws on other aspects of the artist's life, including learning to paint flat shapes from his father, Emmanuel Odita, who was part of the Zaria Arts Society, a modernist Nigerian art movement, as well as coming with his family to America as an infant, and going on to write for *Flash Art International* and *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* about Black artists such as Frank Bowling and Stanley Whitney in the 1990s, after graduating from Bennington College with an MFA in 1990.



Odili Donald Odita, "Fire" (2019), acrylic latex paint on aluminum-core fabricated wood panel with reconstituted wood veneer, 92 x 52 inches (© Odili Donald Odita, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

It seems to me that Odita's deep and complex relationship with Africa shares something with Wilfredo Lam, who grew up in Cuba and had firsthand experience with Yoruba rituals and practices, and Martin Puryear, who was a member of the Peace Corps and worked in Sierra Leone, West Africa, from 1964 to '66, where he learned various indigenous crafts regarding wood joinery.

Through their direct experience with African spiritual and craft practices, Lam and Puryear gained a different understanding of the relationship of these practices to Western culture from that of their white counterparts. Their experience also helps explain why neither of these artists elected to fit into the movements of their time, Surrealism and Post-Minimalism. Instead, each followed a distinct trajectory that rejected key attitudes of Western aesthetics, such as appropriation and fabrication.

I feel similarly about Odita's work. All the connections that have been made between his abstractions and the hard-edged paintings of Stella, Noland, or Bridget Riley, and geometric abstraction and Op Art strike me as superficial, at best. Odita's work addresses a deeper issue, the foundation and inherent biases of the Western painting tradition.

In his clashing compositions and use of artificial colors and materials — for instance, reconstituted wood veneer, whose design can be determined by a computer — Odita

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generates something very different from artists associated with geometric abstraction and Minimalism. By exposing clearly demarcated areas of the patterned, defect-free veneer and avoiding a symmetrical, all-over pattern with his geometric shapes, he distinguishes himself from artists who allied themselves with a Western Eurocentric aesthetic that often took its cues from Clement Greenberg and similar gatekeepers.



Odili Donald Odita, "Dark Angel" (2020), acrylic latex paint on aluminum-core fabricated wood panel with reconstituted wood veneer, 92 x 52 inches (© Odili Donald Odita, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

He has developed an unstable, unpredictable opticality, and referenced his own heritage in African shapes, further updating, as well as reconfiguring, non-Western art to produce what we might call postmodern painting. Odita is nothing if not thorough in defining a painting space that is all his own.

In "Dark Angel" (2020), Odita overlays a black wood veneer ground with two bands of equal width spanning the painting from its top to bottom edge. The placing of the bands gives the black veneer, with its whitish striations, equal prominence. Each band is divided into sharply tapering scalene triangles, all of which are painted a different color. The edge

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of the band's tightly painted skin presses up against the wood veneer's textured surface.

On each side of the black wood veneer that defines the central axis of the painting, the interior facing sides of the bands seem to mirror each other, starting with a swiftly narrowing yellow triangle descending from the top edge. As we move across each band to the outer edges, the mirroring of shape and color stops abruptly. At the same time, we are likely to discern that the colors in each band don't exactly match those in the other band.



Installation view, *Odili Donald Odita: Mirror*, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY, September 10–October 31

As with the other paintings in the exhibition, I kept refocusing my attention, especially regarding similarity and difference. From velvety dark veneer marked by contrasting striations to the wild array colors not found in nature, Odita's paintings revel in their luxuriousness and exuberance, while also acknowledging such sources as the mass-produced paneling one might see in a playroom, den, or inexpensive restaurant.

The wood veneer is both a thing and a flawless substitute for a more expensive and exotic wood. At the same time, formally speaking, the painted bands and black wood veneer vie for attention, with neither conceding to the other. "Dark Angel" is a figure-ground painting, which is another feature that distinguishes it from Western abstraction, particularly minimalism and geometric abstraction. Each of the bands is defined by a distinct clustering together of different colored, sharp-edged geometric shapes. The color of the shapes changes both tonally and starkly, with no discernible logic. Although they shared some colors and their shapes were from the same family, I could detect no underlying order connecting the two bands. They are as different as they are similar, a visual paradox that

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this viewer found captivating.

In addition to his incorporation of a shape that is African in origin, another influence on Odita's work seems to be bebop, a style of jazz that developed in the early 1940s, coinciding with the rise of Abstract Expressionism and the general move toward abstraction in art. What the artist's use of color and geometry shares with bebop are rapid chord changes and improvisation within an established structure.



Odili Donald Odita, "Blackbird" (2020), acrylic latex paint on aluminum-core fabricated wood panel with reconstituted wood veneer, 92 x 52 inches (© Odili Donald Odita, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Odita has transformed Pattern and Decoration's lulling comforts and Op Art's underlying reliance on order, as well as geometric abstraction and Minimalism, into something unstable, unpredictable, and, most importantly, pleurably enthralling. He has done so by connecting himself with a tradition that the Western Eurocentric art world has treated as peripheral and to be colonized. His synthesis of reconstituted wood veneer, a vast array of colors, and a vocabulary inspired by both African art and digital graphics amounts to a major achievement, equal in abstraction to what Kerry James Marshall has achieved in figurative painting and the reimagining of American history and art.