

ACUMEN

UNITED STATES - PHILADELPHIA

ODILI DONALD ODITA, COLOUR AS A FREE TERRITORY

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Freedom Is... – © Odili Donald Odita, MoMA

Bands of bright, slanted colors, fragmenting prisms, tessellations that reject the center. For thirty years, the Nigerian-American painter Odili Donald Odita has made abstraction a political language, nourished by the legacy of an engaged father, African textile traditions, and music. From MoMA to a shelter for the most disadvantaged, his year 2026 simultaneously reveals the scales of these projects.

His canvases do not invite a direct, frontal view. The motif rejects hierarchy: no focal point carries more weight than another, and the gaze, rather than settling on the center, is invited to move, to circulate, to recognize multiple areas of focus. This decentered geometry, which Odita has practiced since the 1990s, is more than a formal choice. It is a politics of perception, a gentle yet firm way of rejecting the authority of a dominant viewpoint. For him, color is never an effect; it speaks, it takes a stand.



Installation view, Odili Donald Odita: *shadowland*, January 15 – February 28, 2026, David Kordansky Gallery, New York. © On White Wall Studio, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery



Camouflage, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 213.7 x 331 x 3.8 cm, © Christopher Stach, courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

Where do these forms come from? Odita's sources of inspiration are multiple, and this multiplicity is deliberate: the weave of Mbuti fabrics, Nigerian indigeneous wall art, the tradition of African-American patchwork, American hard-edge abstraction, graphic design, cinematic lighting, and the textiles—both Nigerian and American—that populated his childhood. As erudite as they are personal, these references defy categorization. Born in 1966 in Enugu, Nigeria, he now lives and works in Philadelphia. Rather than hierarchizing these influences, he allows them to coexist on the same surface: *"It's important to understand the context from which an artist speaks, and the platform from which they address their references."* As he points out, more than the school he belongs to, what interests him is *"What these artists are really talking about, where this sound, this visual vibration, comes from."*



Revolution Action, 2026, acrylic latex on wall, 393.7 x 853.4 cm © On White Wall Studio, courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

Among the elements that nourish his work, music occupies a special place. It is less an inspiration than a way of thinking. Odita draws from it the formal solutions for his paintings, reflecting on rhythm, breath, and the community that forms around a sound. This role of music takes on a literal dimension in *Songs from Life*. A monumental commission from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Odita has been covering the museum's main hall from floor to ceiling since April 2025 with an intricate network of colored bands applied with acrylic latex. The largest commission of his career, this site-specific installation is on display until spring 2027. Visitors can scan a QR code to listen to a playlist of songs that have inspired the artist, including tracks by Marvin Gaye, Bill Withers, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Talking Heads, Michael Jackson, and Led Zeppelin. The hall, trans-

formed into a shared stage, brings together audiences who would not normally cross paths. For Odita, the colors are expressions of freedom and change.



Freedom Is... – © Odili Donald Odita, MoMA



Sanctuary, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 205.7 x 203.2 x 3.8 cm, © Christopher Stach, courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

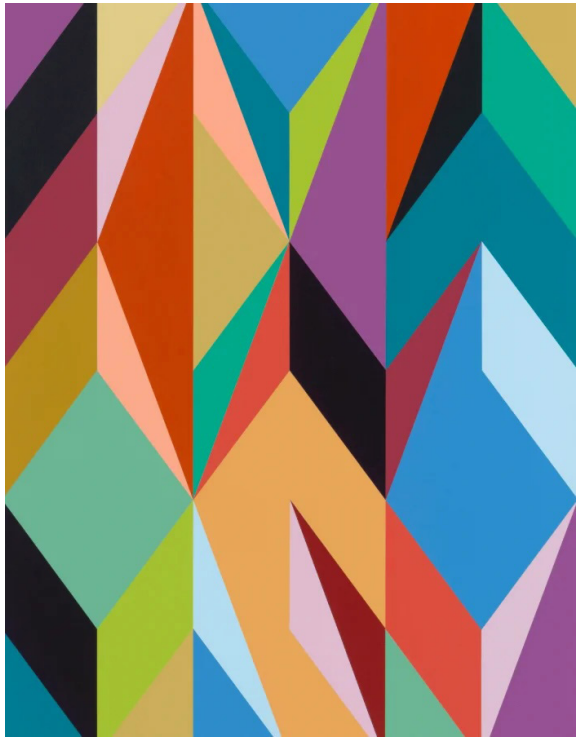
RIOT, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 228.6 x 172.7 x 3.8 cm, © Christopher Stach, courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

This idea of freedom is not merely aesthetic; it stems from a very specific heritage. His father, Okechukwu Emmanuel Odita, a painter and art historian who passed away in May 2025, co-founded the Zaria Rebels in 1958, a collective of Nigerian students who played a pivotal role in the development of post-independence art. Within a British-inspired art school, its members challenged the Eurocentric curriculum and demanded the study of African traditions. Later becoming the first Black Africanist to teach African art history in the United States, the father instilled in his son the idea that art could never be politically neutral. "*Understanding my world came to me by observing his,*" said Odita, adding: "*Looking at his paintings was like an open door. A shape can make a color move.*"

This connection is made visible by the exhibition "Shadowland". Presented at the David Kordansky Gallery in New York in January-February 2026, it brought Odita and the gallery together for the second time around three sections: recent paintings, including a large mural, *Revolution Action*, photographic collages rarely shown, taken from *The black album*, a series of digitally manipulated advertising images and magazine covers from the 1990s, including two retouched covers of *Vogue* which expose the racial subtexts of the fashion press; and two canvases signed by another Odita, his father – *Njikoka: Nigerian Unity, Yoruba and Igbo* and *Njikoka: Nigerian Unity, Yoruba and Hausa* – Painted in the 1970s, these abstract compositions engage in a dialogue with his own works in the exhibition. The title of the exhibition, meaning "the land of shadow" in English, is not insignificant. For Odita, shadow is not merely what ideology obscures; it is also the protected zone, removed from the dominant gaze, where resistance and creative freedom can be forged.



Vogue, 1997, digitally manipulated photograph, 117.6 x 166.2 cm, framed: 120.3 x 168.6 x 5.7 cm, © Dario Lasagni, courtesy David Kordansky Gallery



Heavy, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 215.9 x 215.9 x 3.5 cm © Christopher Stach, courtesy
David Kordansky Gallery

Protector, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 228.6 x 101.6 x 3.5 cm © Christopher Stach, courtesy
David Kordansky Gallery



© Natalie Kahn, Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery

Another aspect of this news is found neither in a museum nor a gallery, but in a shelter. In Philadelphia, on South Broad Street, Broad Street Love, a charity that welcomes people living in extreme poverty, now houses a permanent triptych. *Freedom is...* Three banners of fine fabric hang beneath the vault of an ancient sanctuary, bathed in the light of stained-glass windows, vibrant with abstract forms and colors. Commissioned by ArtPhilly as part of the What Now: 2026 festival and realized with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, the work, unveiled on May 30, 2026, extends what Broad Street Love calls "radical hospitality"—going beyond traditional social service norms, with the conviction that homeless people deserve access to beauty as much as to food. The open-ended title *Freedom is...*, is a sentence to be completed by the person looking at it.



© Natalie Kahn, Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery

Odita is also exhibiting this summer in the western part of the continent. The Nevada Museum of Art in Reno is bringing together three of his recent paintings as part of the Joyner/Giuffrida Visiting Artist Program. Presented together, they create a narrative of spatial possibilities where color ceases to be mere ornament and becomes a structuring force, an agent of movement and perception. Far from the scale of the New York commission, this intimate, room-sized format allows viewers to experience, at eye level, how each canvas organizes its own space.

Several scales, several addresses, the same gesture. The museum, the art market, social work... Colour, everywhere, as a free territory; and behind it, the idea that Odita never tires of recalling: making abstraction has never ceased to be a way, subtle but real, of organizing the world differently.



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