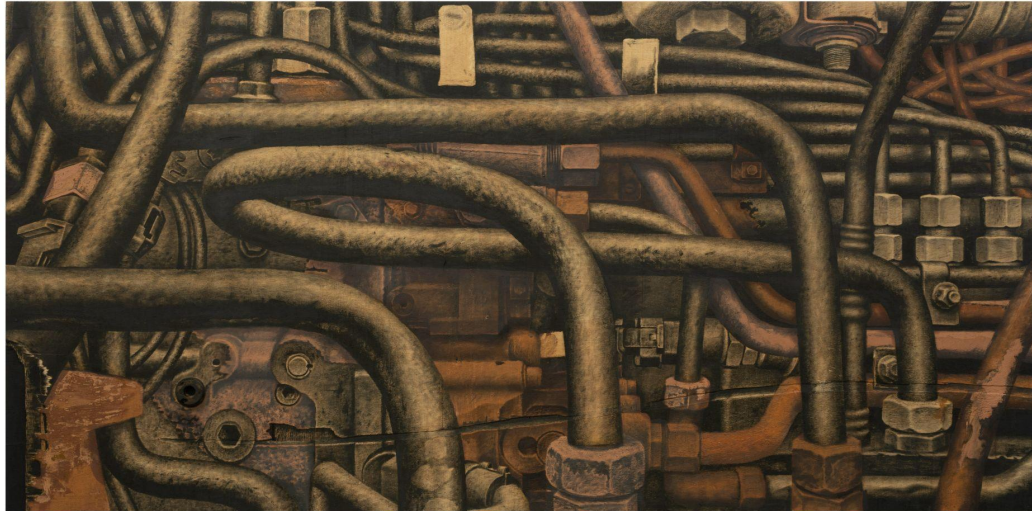


PRESS RELEASE

Jonathan Okoronkwo

Some things stay broken

December 14 – January 17, 2022, Gallery II, Accra, Ghana



Used motor oil, decommissioned auto steel parts dissolved in nitric, sulphuric and hydrochloric acids, found objects on first grade plywood, 244 x 122cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.

Gallery 1957 is pleased to present *Some things stay broken*, a solo exhibition by Jonathan Okoronkwo, curated by Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson. The exhibition is on show from December 14th - January 17th.

“Objects are explained entirely by the human attempt to achieve human ends, and not by the unavoidable need to adapt ourselves to the objects around us, whose very existence, as such, requires we enter into relationships with them largely on their terms and not ours.”

-Ron Richardson, 2020. The Agency of Objects

Humans usually perceive objects in terms of what they use them for, other than how objects also use and transform humans, and transform the world beyond human relations. Okoronkwo's interest with machines is not that of the functional machine with coherent parts working harmoniously to achieve a fixed end. The dysfunctional car bodies he paints are not just dead because they are not useful to humans; but they are vibrant things that keep transforming themselves and everything else alongside.

The artist's muse, Suame Magazine, is one of the biggest industrial clusters in Africa. It is located in Kumasi, roughly covering 576 square metres. This is where Okoronkwo takes his dystopian imagery and inspirations from. Suame Magazine is a site of colossal assemblage of disposed spare parts from vehicles all over the world. One cannot escape the invasive smells of 'dirty oils' in the air with metal and plastic debris that makes strangers uncomfortable. Although chaotic, this site creates room for new possibilities and resolving what constitutes the meaning of 'chaotic'. By creating profound forms and processes, beyond the canons of Western standardised automotive assembling. The colossal scale and cluster of different car body parts in such a site, transforms automotive artisanry itself. Suame Magazine, which is itself a dynamic machine, transforms and challenges its artisans to invent new possibilities that do not issue from or conform to the pre-set structural coherence of the imported vehicles themselves.

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Objects can renegotiate how we use them, transforming us and them within the process. This process is not an easy ride, as they can frustrate and push us in unexpected ways to invent, improvise and acquire new skills. Anyone could relate to that annoying moment when a machine gave up on us the 'owners' and we start cursing at it like it's another person. Every sense of division between the animate and inanimate that makes humans appear powerful, eludes us at that moment. Consequently, machines have earned a bad reputation from us-humans, when we dwell on how they expose human vulnerability and fragility. For transhumanists they can make us ever more powerful; and for some post-humanists, they could put a question mark on if we were ever 'human' to begin with; or question if in being human, we assumed the whole world revolved around us as its centre. It is the preoccupation with this centre that fills humans with a sense of control and power over the outside world - objectifying and segregating it from ourselves, until Timothy Morton meets us in our wishful daydreaming to speak of hyperobjects like global warming and machines that we can't fully wrap our heads around and fear they are too large to be contained by us.

When artists acknowledge molecular interactions and their effects, their conceptual gestures bring out the histories and cultural contexts of their materials. When viewers pay attention to the interconnectedness of invisible and visible elements, it alters their encounter with a work of art. Okoronkwo does not limit his exploration of machines to pictorial and sculptural dystopic depictions or configurations of the hard-body, mechanical components of machines; but also, the agency of chemical and molecular transformations within the assemblage of machines for machines are not just the hard components, they are also the chemical and molecular. He explores these chemical transformations using motor oil waste and acids like nitric, sulfuric, hydrofluoric and hydrochloric acids for the process of rusting, oxidation and dissolving of hard steel into paste, and obtaining different oxidised metallic colour palettes.

Photography is another site of machine, object, life and human encounter which Okoronkwo explores in his current projects. 'If machines made it too easy to produce a painting, then where is the genius of human skill?' It is this lingering threat to the hegemony of human skill and authorship, that made photography a long contested mechano-chemical medium for art for decades. Okoronkwo rather embraces and expands the ways in which photography could become the anamorphic lens through which to look at machines and the world and for machines to look at themselves, humans and the world too. Okoronkwo not only paints mechanical parts of machines, but employs various ways in which digital photographic pixels and grids could shape how he constructs, composes and welds his painting objects. He not only takes pictures of fragmented car bodies; he fragments and distorts the image in Adobe Photoshop, and reassembles the fragments into grids. These fragmented grids, he assembles in his paintings in the form of squares, rectangles and hexagonal shaped wooden panels. These rectilinear shapes do not necessarily imply a mechanistic ordering. Natural self-formations of regular and symmetrical patterns are found in crystals and metal lattices, and hexagons in bacteriophages and hydro-carbon lattices. There exist all manner of forms in what we call nature: regular and irregular, symmetrical and asymmetrical, predictable and unpredictable, human and non-human, beautiful and catastrophic.

Okoronkwo layers these varied complexities of forms as he embraces machines as more than just being functional, non-organic, complete, closed and unchangingly repeatable. The wooden panels become pixels that still retain their fragmentary nature like a jigsaw puzzle. It is a puzzle without trying to form or complete a coherent whole all the time. It is not the type of gestalt that demands a whole picture to make sense only by coherently summing up its parts syntagmatically. Like a fractal, each pixel of the image is itself fragmented and the pixels also form a fragmented whole. The anamorphic lens through which he uses photography is not a literal depiction of the site he extracts; he necessarily exacerbates the fragmentary nature of shattered and disposed car bodies like an alien that hardly recognizes itself. An example is how Okoronkwo composes an image of a tube: fragmented, with at times missing parts, connecting dysfunctionally to any other different part. The grid and hexagon-shaped wooden panels, to which he presents his work as pixels, are fragments that allow an image to have multiple configurations. These multiple configurations are possible because the pixels/parts are not regulated by a centralised

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regularising whole; though they allude to be whole with images of the parts taken from different times and different spaces.

This collaging also extends to collaging actual parts of machines, which fragments the pictorial experience. It is not just a smooth flat plane, but with corrosion and tears from acids and layers of ripped plywood. His paintings are certainly not a harmless kiss of paint on a smooth perfect canvas. The acidic paint literally could devour the wood he paints on. The volition of acids is a consuming flame with whatever it meets; a subtle inclusion of destruction into painting. Colour from this corrosive process is neither a harmless beauty. Every colour variant of corrosive metal speaks of the concentrations (at macro-levels) of inherent violence of oxidation processes which renders even water and air as violent substances; - how much more acids with a bad name that already points to being harsh.

The paradox of life is inherent with water and air, which could be life giving and decompose matter. Beauty and violence could be co-travellers, especially seeing the gentle swirling brown clouds of toxic hydrogen gas when Okoronkwo mixes rusting iron plates with high concentrations of hydrofluoric acid to extract metal paste for his paintings. Violence it is, with crude oil that comes from 'nature' and could be toxic to it. This ecology is not one that is merely convivial and that is what Okoronkwo's work heightens with this exhibition. One could be caught up in webs of wires and discarded engines that all connect to paintings and car parts that could make us reconsider our relations with machines beyond what we simply use them for. What if we were machines too?

–Extract from curatorial essay by Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson

About the artist

(b.1993, Ghana. Lives and works in Accra)

Jonathan Okoronkwo is currently pursuing his MFA in painting and sculpture at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). As an emerging artist, Okoronkwo is curious about extending his practice beyond conventional art practices such as drawing and painting. He extends the reach of his work to photography, woodwork, welding, assemblage and construction. His interest in the evidence of time and usage on machines informs his choice of medium and material. The artist reuses and transforms materials and substances already charged with history through usage over time by the machines he sources from. Okoronkwo's unique large scale paintings seek to ultimately express his fascination with human mortality and its expression through the invention of machines.

Unlimited, his first group exhibition with the gallery took place in 2022 in Accra. Previous group exhibitions include *ARXAFRICA: The Powerhouse*, KNUST Museum, Kumasi, Ghana (2022); *Failure is the Key*, KNUST Botanical Gardens, Kumasi, Ghana (2021); *Zoom*, Scholarship Holders' Exhibition, State Academy of Fine Arts, Karlsruhe, Germany (2019); *Wie Soll Ich Meine Seele Halte/Mut*, Kunstvereine Freiburg, Karlsruhe, Germany (2019); *Ustival*, KNUST, Kumasi, Ghana (2018); *Orderly Disorderly*, KNUST, Kumasi, Ghana (2017); *Something Played*, Kumasi, Ghana (2017); *Cornfields in Accra*, KNUST, Kumasi, Ghana (2016) and *The Arts Council of the African Studies Association 17th Triennial Symposium*, Institute Of African Studies University Of Ghana, Accra, Ghana (2017).

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About Gallery 1957

Based in Accra, with a London outpost opened in 2020, Gallery 1957 has a curatorial focus on West Africa. Presenting a programme of exhibitions, installations and performances by the region's most significant artists, the gallery serves as a vital platform, promoting West Africa's presence within the art scene by hosting ambitious exhibitions, providing resources for residencies and participating in international art fairs. Founded by Marwan Zakhem in 2016, Gallery 1957 has evolved from over 15 years of private collecting. The gallery now hosts three spaces in Accra – one in the Kempinski Hotel and two in the Galleria Mall – and a London outpost in Hyde Park Gate.

Artist: Jonathan Okoronkwo

Title: *Some things stay broken*

Dates: 14th December 2022 – 17th January 2023

Opening Reception: 14th December, 2022 - 6pm-9pm

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