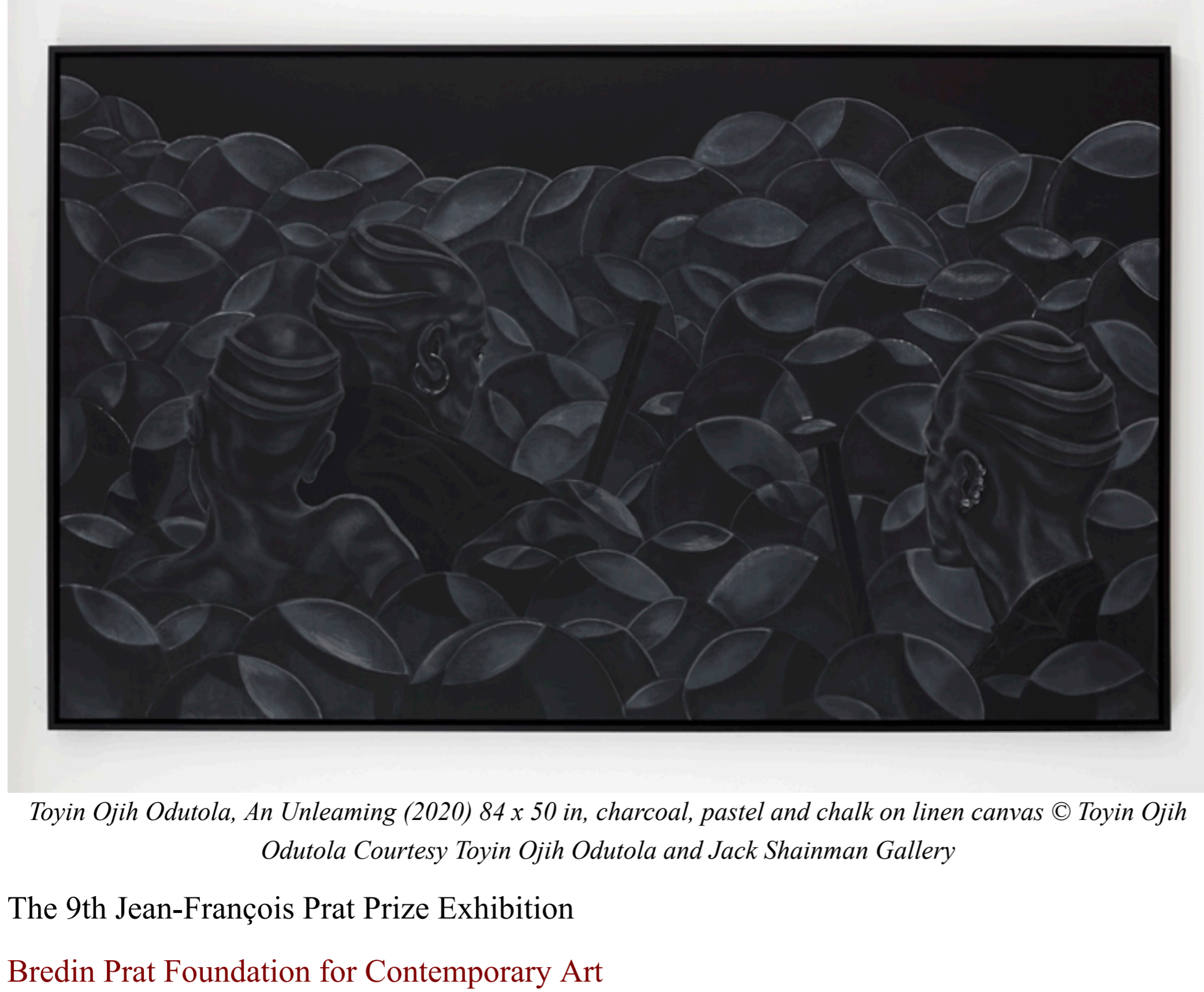


The 9th Jean-François Prat Prize Exhibition



Toyin Ojih Odutola, An Unleaming (2020) 84 x 50 in., charcoal, pastel and chalk on linen canvas © Toyin Ojih Odutola Courtesy Toyin Ojih Odutola and Jack Shainman Gallery

The 9th Jean-François Prat Prize Exhibition
Bredin Prat Foundation for Contemporary Art

53, quai d'Orsay, 7è Paris
Until November 14th, 2020

By **JOSEPH NECHVATAL**, October 2020

In defiance of the recognized dire racial, populist political, and viral pandemic predicaments facing much of the world, on October 1st the award of the 9th *Jean-François Prat Prize* was bestowed upon the Black Nigerian-American artist **Toyin Ojih Odutola** at the **Bredin Prat Foundation for Contemporary Art**. I was fortunate to have physically attended the final selection process, that willowed down her work from three candidates of emerging painters now being exhibited in a group show at the Foundation until November 14th. As winner, Odutola was awarded €20,000 in support of her efforts to enlarge the ongoing Black cultural revolution by manifesting additional myths, methods, and metaphorizations.

The Foundation's collection began modestly but voraciously as a private collection of art historian Marie-Aline Prat (an expert of the **Cercle et Carré** group of abstract artists in 1930s Paris) and her deceased (in 2011) lawyer husband Jean-François Prat in the late-1950s, and is currently directed by Frédéric Brière. It smartly focuses on the question of *what makes a picture* as embodied within international approaches to painting, pseudo-painting, and art photography.

As Marie-Aline and Jean-François's son Sébastien Prat (also a lawyer in the firm) explained to me, in 2017 the Prat Collection, that had hung in the family home and throughout the **Bredin Prat** law firm's offices, was auctioned off at Christie's (some also donated to the Centre Pompidou) then the partners of Bredin Prat 've decided to fund the Bredin Prat Foundation and start collecting anew. To celebrate the memory of contemporary art lover Jean-François, the partners of the law firm—which he co-founded—and his family, decided to pay avuncular tribute to his name by creating in 2012 this contemporary art award. Each year, an expert art world committee pre-selects eight artists and shortlists three finalists, from among whom the winning artist is selected. Then, following the vote by the jury (80% partners of Bredin Prat, and 20% of art world invites) the person chairing the Prize presents the award to the winning artist. Under consideration and on view this year were three of Toyin Ojih Odutola's painting-scaled black and white graphic works (large format drawings made in white chalk, pastel and charcoal on a black canvas) that were in competition with paintings by the Japanese post-internet painter Kei Imazu—brilliantly presented live and in French by Florian Gaité—and Torey Thornton, who independent curator Taylor Le Melle enthusiastically introduced via Zoom. Zoé Whitley, director of the London Chisenhale Gallery, precisely presented by Zoom the ideas behind Odutola's work to a masked and socially distanced jury of around forty-five lawyers from the firm, chaired by the fascinatingly astute Marie-Claude Beaud, director of the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco and former founding director of the Cartier Foundation and the Mudam in Luxembourg. Sébastien Prat made the point to me that the jury of lawyers take great interest and delight in the convincing manner of the presenters pleading the case of the three artists, as it is a delicious *détournement* for them.

Odutola, has been known primarily for her pastels, charcoal, pencil on paper and ballpoint pen portraits of (often Black) people, that echo those of Kerry James Marshall. She appears to have been exploring representation within a somewhat staid academic visual tradition while dealing with the many complexities of Black identity and class consciousness via the American socio-political constructions of skin color. Odutola herself was born in 1985 in Nigeria and left Africa with her family at the age of five, when her father began teaching at the University of California in Berkeley and then at the historically Black university, Alabama A&M. Given Odutola's upper-middle class educational milieu within the Deep South, it is understandable why she, by focusing on her own experiences, has been seeking to broaden the representation of the concept of blackness as a social marker by making art images of a traditionally invisible Black bourgeoisie.



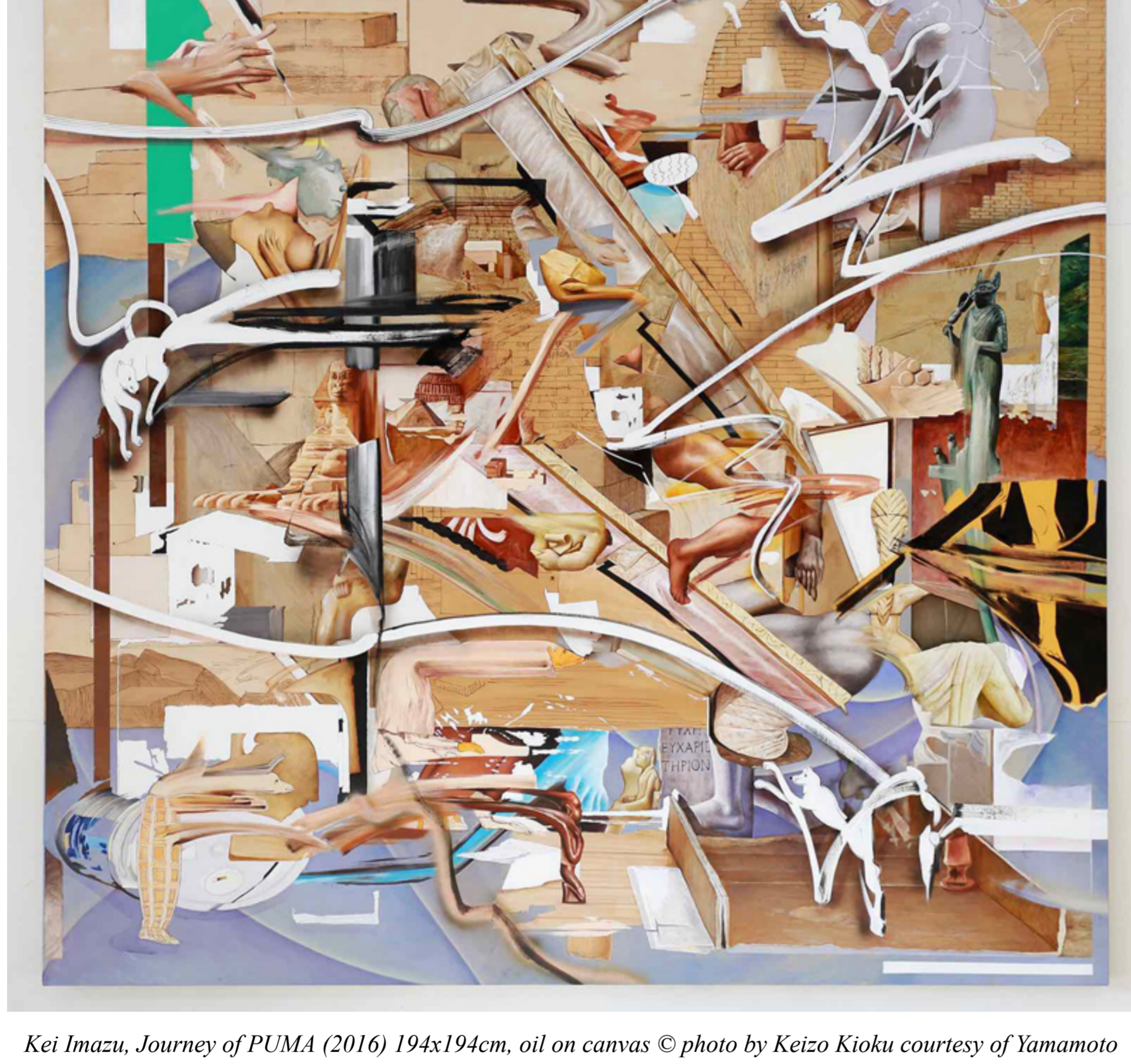
Toyin Ojih Odutola, First Touch (2019) 84 x 50 in., charcoal, pastel and chalk on linen canvas © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of Toyin Ojih Odutola and Jack Shainman Gallery

Actually, I prefer looking at her more farfetched fantastical works—like the raven black *An Unleaming* (2020) and the delicately finessed *First Touch* (2019). It conveys a harp-like temperament vibrating in the presence of passion. For these newer works she won the Jean-François Prat Prize, as you cannot help but be enchanted by her depictions of an imaginary prehistoric civilization ruled by black hunter-warrior women, who are served upon by naked humanoid. I certainly responded favorably to their self-indulgent fondness for sensuous noir luxury—and her portrayal of a queer, black, female-dominated society that has succeeded in overturning historical hierarchies.

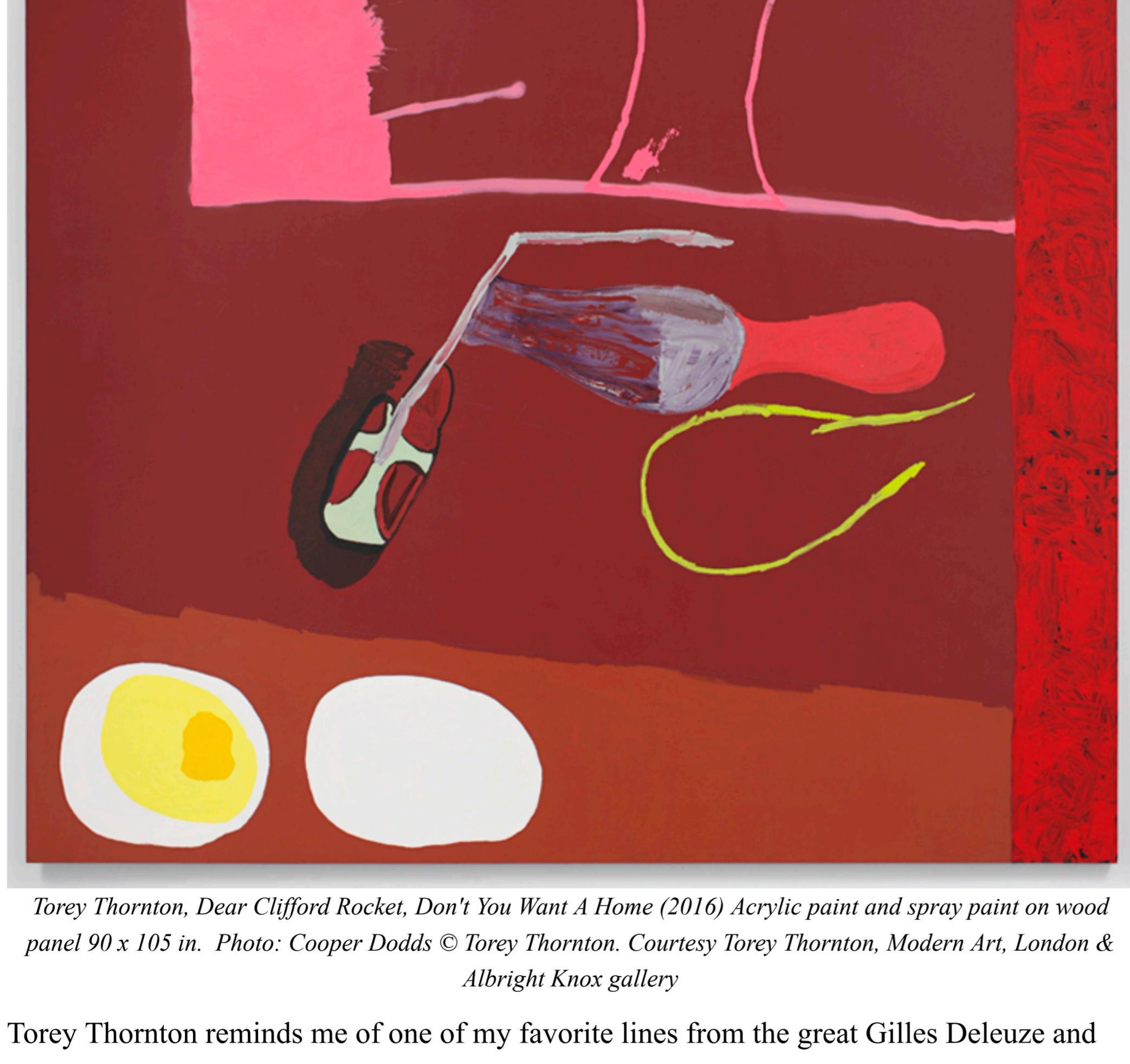


Kei Imazu, Black Eyes (2016) 194x162 in., oil on canvas © photo by Keizo Kioku courtesy of Yamamoto Gendai

Kei Imazu ambitiously paints by hand the stretching and melting miasmic energy of hyper-colliding digital glitches—based on digital collages she creates from her enormous image bank collected off the Internet. Her paintings are a(nother) place where meatspace and cyberspace meet and suggest dynamic and multilayered selfhoods. They look to me like they may have been made playing around with 2D/3D frame buffers in TouchDesigner. But regardless, her swooning and dancing painted digital imagery is brimming with capriciousness tinged with an eroticism that ranged from subtle insinuation to near salaciousness. The figurative fragments in her paintings *Black Eyes* (2016) and *Journey of PUMA* (2016)—flowing within something like honey-blood—seem as if they have been ripped from raven stars and stretched by magnetic fields. They took me to a magic mushroom place of the rhizomatic mind's spooky entanglements, and merit long looking. Such rhizome-like works pound with a mercurial drifting/collapse of the primordial into the post-human—and so remind us again of the fiasco of Relational art's ephemerality. These hybrid digital paintings exemplify how contemporary art today requires *viractuality* (which has both material-actual and virtual-ephemeral aspects). The scalability and portability of the just-in-time production of art objects, transfigured by technology at its peak, has happily replaced the art-as-life-style failure of relational art's full fleetingness.



Kei Imazu, Journey of PUMA (2016) 194x194cm., oil on canvas © photo by Keizo Kioku courtesy of Yamamoto Gendai



Torey Thornton, Dear Clifford Rocket, Don't You Want A Home (2016) Acrylic paint and spray paint on wood panel 90 x 105 in. Photo: Cooper Dodds © Torey Thornton. Courtesy Torey Thornton, Modern Art, London & Albright Knox gallery

Torey Thornton reminds me of one of my favorite lines from the great Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: "Bring something incomprehensible into the world!" **Thornton, Capitalism and Schizophrenia**: "Bring something prefers pronouns of multiplicity over the singular in defiance of binary thinking, makes majestic large combine-paintings of flair and audacity that are wholly fresh yet familiar: bold, loosely tossed forms that oscillate between figuration and abstraction. I loved some of their hip swagger, like in *First, After I saw Elvis Look At Me And Imagined Him Looking To Andy* (2014–15)—that recalled to my mind Joan Miró's *Painting and Anti-Painting* series from 1927 to 1937, such as *The Bullfighter* (1927). It is a majestic and gorgeous ocean of silver—generally my generation of artists' favorite color. Their burgundy-based but bubblegum-pink punctuated painting *Dear Clifford Rocket, Don't You Want A Home* (2016) suggested notes of some of the more loosely tossed paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Motherwell, Albert Oehlen, and early Julian Schnabel, as lavish lad. Yet Thornton strikes me as a much more complex human being than their male predecessors, laden by the largeness of love and overloaded with the tears of the storm.



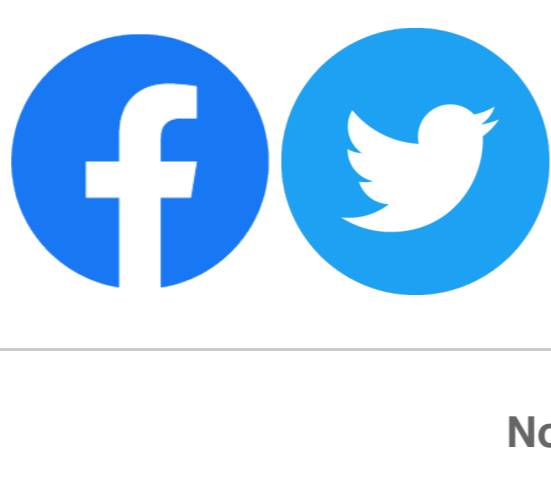
Torey Thornton, First, After I saw Elvis Look At Me And Imagined Him Looking To Andy (2014–15) aluminum enamel paint, oil, wood, spray paint and collage on wood panel, 70.9 x 86.7 in. © Torey Thornton. Courtesy of Torey Thornton and Modern Art, London

In the libertine formal inventions of all three of these exciting younger artists, a magical, imaginary, frenetic world of sly burlesque naiveté is suggested in which historic white male patriarchal conventions—related to gender, race and sexuality—have been ecstatically inverted. Their disambiguating works rhapsodically wriggle on a poetic as well as that symbolizes the blurry intermingling of art and the harsh realities of life as law. With Trump, driven by his macho lunacy infected with the invisible virus he forcefully tried to deny, these sensually provocative and perverse works all the more poignantly vibrate with the mad mood of our moment: one in which we live in a viral world full to the gills with post-pop culture and social-political *vagina dentate* fantasies. **WM**

JOSEPH NECHVATAL

Joseph Nechvatal is an artist whose computer-robotic assisted paintings and computer software animations are shown regularly in galleries and museums throughout the world. In 2011 his book *Immersion Into Noise* was published by the University of Michigan Library's Scholarly Publishing Office in conjunction with the Open Humanities Press. He exhibited in *Noise*, a show based on his book, as part of the Venice Biennale 55, and is artistic director of the Minóy Punctum Book/CD project.

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