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Toyin Ojih Odutola
A Countervailing Theory

11 Aug 2020–24 Jan 2021

**GUILD
HALL
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A Countervailing Theory presents a series of 40 drawings by Nigerian-American artist Toyin Ojih Odutola. In this series, Ojih Odutola uses drawing as a tool for storytelling. Each artwork forms part of an epic narrative that unfolds in front of us along the 90-metre-long gallery.

We are presented with a fictional, prehistoric civilisation dominated by female rulers (the *Eshu*) and served by male labourers (the *Koba*), in a surreal landscape inspired by Plateau State in central Nigeria.

The title, *A Countervailing Theory*, frames the ideas at play in this exhibition. To 'countervail' means to offset an existing power with an equal force. Ojih Odutola challenges us

to re-consider the histories and values we are taught, particularly concerning colonial narratives and gender power dynamics.

Ojih Odutola's drawings are accompanied by an immersive soundscape by Ghanaian-British sound artist Peter Adjaye, titled *Ceremonies Within*. Adjaye made the soundscape in response to the installation, using a variety of instruments, including the West African ogene (double bells) and okpola (a woodblock), alongside recordings of natural elements such as wind and water. Together, the drawings and soundscape lead the viewer into a fantastical, multi-sensory world.



Mating Ritual (2019) from *A Countervailing Theory*. Image: © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

About the artist

Toyin Ojih Odutola was born in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, in 1985, and now lives and works in New York, USA. Ojih Odutola's work explores the variety and possibilities of telling stories through drawing. She has developed a distinctive technique of mark-making, using only drawing materials such as ballpoint pens, pencils, pastels and charcoal. She is particularly interested in how to describe the many different textures in the world around us, from the surface of

skin to the terrain of a landscape, exploring how these textures can convey multiple histories. She often spends months creating extensive imaginary narratives, which are presented in a series of works that act like scenes from a film or chapters in a novel. Influenced by a broad range of sources, from ancient history to popular culture, Ojih Odutola builds visual worlds that explore and question how society is organised and how human relationships have been formed.

Ideas for engaging with the exhibition

Storytelling

Choose one of the drawings and write down or say to yourself the first three words that come to mind. Concentrate on building a story from there.

Each drawing has a title – these are displayed on the wall opposite the drawings, at the beginning and the end of the exhibition, and they are also reproduced in the handout. Use these as helpful pointers when developing your reading of the story.

Have fun trying to piece the story together – there's no right or wrong way to think about what's going on in this narrative. Your interpretation is as valid as anyone else's!

Conversation

If you're with someone, ask them what they think is happening in the narrative and share your own thoughts. Work together on your ideas.

Slow looking

Take your time when looking. Sometimes interesting ideas only come slowly.

Soundscape

Write down or describe to yourself the first three individual sounds you hear.

Mark making

These drawings are created using white chalk, pastel and charcoal, on a black gesso surface applied to either linen canvas or board. Look closely at the marks Ojih Odutola makes. How many different types of marks, lines, textures and shapes can you see?

Questions to reflect on

- The exhibition explores an imagined ancient African civilisation where women are dictators and same-sex relationships are the norm. How does seeing this alternative **vision of society** make you reflect on the way our own society is organised?
- Ojih Odutola uses only **black and white materials** to create these drawings. How does the lack of colour affect your experience of the exhibition?
- Ojih Odutola is inspired by **graphic novels**, especially Japanese anime and manga. Can you see these influences in the exhibition?
- The drawings in the exhibition are hung at different heights along the curved **gallery wall**. How does this impact the way you encounter the story that unfolds across the works?
- Do any of the drawings stand out to you, **personally**? If so, why do you think this may be?
- How does **Peter Adjaye's** immersive **soundscape**, *Ceremonies Within*, affect the way you interpret the exhibition?
- Read Ojih Odutola's **text panel at the exit** of the Curve gallery. How does this make you reconsider the drawings and the narrative?

Creative activities

Check out the Barbican website for creative activities related to the exhibition and share your own responses with us by emailing creative.learning@barbican.org.uk and using **#ToyinOjihOdutola**.

For more information, visit barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2020/event/toyin-ojih-odutola-a-countervailing-theory

Ideas for engaging with the exhibition through the national curriculum can also be found on our website.

Please get in touch with us at creative.learning@barbican.org.uk if you have any feedback on this resource or you require additional information.



Establishing the Plot (2019) from *A Countervailing Theory*.
Image: © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Cover image:
Semblance of Certainty (2019) from
A Countervailing Theory. Image:
© Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist
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