

Njideka Akunyili Crosby Portals

Press View with the artist: Friday 30 September, 10am - 12noon

Exhibition runs 4 October – 5 November 2016.

Victoria Miro, Gallery II, 16 Wharf Road, London N1 7RW



Victoria Miro is delighted to present *Portals*, the first solo exhibition in Europe by Njideka Akunyili Crosby.

The Los Angeles-based artist, who relocated from Nigeria to the United States at the age of 16, draws on art historical, political and personal references to make luminous, densely layered figurative compositions whose intricate surfaces combine disparate materials and aesthetic traditions. An amalgam of processes including painting, drawing and photo-transfer techniques are harnessed in large-scale works on paper that, precise in style, nonetheless conjure the complexity of contemporary experience. The title of the exhibition, *Portals*, is immediately suggestive of windows or doorways, though one might equally think of TV sets or computer screens. It also refers to the title of a recent work by the artist, *Portals*, 2016, now in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. In Akunyili Crosby's work, doors, windows and screens function as physical, conceptual and emotional points of arrival and departure, while in a broader sense the work itself is a portal through which mutable ideas about transcultural identity flow back and forth.

On initial impression the work appears to focus on interiors or apparently everyday scenes and social gatherings. Many of Akunyili Crosby's images feature figures – images of family and friends – in scenarios derived from familiar domestic experiences: eating, drinking, watching TV. Rarely do they meet the viewer's gaze but seem bound up in moments of intimacy or reflection that are left open to interpretation. *Ike Ya*, 2016, for instance, captures an embrace between a couple that seems as conciliatory as it does affectionate. These are, on one level, snapshots of everyday life, and an invitation to share in the artist's world (Akunyili Crosby and her husband are often the models for the work).

However, ambiguities of narrative and gesture are underscored by a second wave of imagery, only truly discernible close-up. Vibrantly patterned areas are created from images derived from Nigerian pop culture and politics, including pictures of pop stars, models and celebrities such as Nollywood actress Genevieve Nnaji, as well as lawyers in white wigs and military dictators. Some of these images are drawn from the artist's archive of personal snapshots, magazines and advertisements, while others are sourced from the internet. Akunyili Crosby applies these to the surface of her work through an acetone transfer technique, sometimes in discrete areas, sometimes in more arrangements that seem to proliferate across the walls and floors of the rooms she describes and the clothing and skin of the figures contained within them. It is partly via this labour-intensive process that she addresses the idea of cultural overlap and the complex layering of influences – personal, cultural and political – on people and places.

These are images necessarily complicated in order to counter generalisations about African or diasporic experience. Describing her interiors as 'wormholes', Akunyili Crosby articulates the nuances of post-colonial identity and encourages leaps of time and space, across cultures and continents. The meetings of people and objects that occur in Akunyili Crosby's work look as if they could feasibly exist, yet her fictions are designed to reveal jumps of scale and leaps of logic over time. Featuring a lone figure in an interior, an unwatched TV and a tea tray set for two, *Super Blue Omo*, 2016, is, again, a scene of deceptive simplicity whose tilted planes become, on close inspection, an invitation to consider a more complex narrative. Titles for Akunyili Crosby can serve both poetic and narrative ends. While *Super Blue Omo* refers to a well-known brand of washing powder, with a long-running advertisement that ran on Nigerian television during the artist's childhood in the 1980s (which can be seen on the TV set in the work), it is also the jumping off point for an extended meditation on chromatic and psychological states of 'blueness' – the glow of the room and its atmosphere of introspection.

While the artist's formative years in Nigeria are a constant source of inspiration, Akunyili Crosby's grounding in Western art history adds further layers of reference. Just as the genre of still life has since its infancy been used as both a representation of the quotidian and an expression of the symbolic, Akunyili Crosby's still lifes are both highly personal and freighted with cultural meaning. *The Twain Shall Meet*, 2015, for example, is one of a number of works that incorporates an image of the table owned by the artist's grandmother, who appears in a framed portrait. Laden with familial and other possessions it also plays host to a range of visual cues about geographical and of changing socio-economic circumstances. A recurring motif is the kerosene lamp. Ubiquitous in rural areas of Nigeria, where electricity supplies are at best unreliable, it shares space with plastic containers used for storing, cooking and serving food. Here, ideas of home, hospitality and generosity mingle with thoughts about cultural inheritance in a broader sense. There are references to a tea culture derived from British colonialism. Christianity, another colonial import, is alluded to in two framed images of the Virgin Mary.

A sense of cross-cultural currents moving through Akunyili Crosby's work is heightened by the architectural spaces she describes. *The Twain Shall Meet* makes reference to *Interior*, 1899, by Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi. In his painting, Hammershøi depicts a figure in an interior in which both doors to a room are closed. By contrast, in *The Twain Shall Meet* Akunyili Crosby opens the doors of her interior to reveal other spaces, other doors. Further works in the exhibition continue to dissolve boundaries. Vegetation in the form of houseplants, wallpaper, patterned fabric or views of foliage snatched through windows serves to break down distinctions between interior and exterior space, while in a recent still life, a window that frames the composition is, on close inspection, composed of small transfer images of similar scenes of views through windows, endlessly reflected and refracted. It is in this respect that her work operates in the liminal, in-between zones that post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha refers to as 'the third space', a point of overlap, conflation and mixing of cultural influence specific to diaspora communities.

Akunyili Crosby was born in Enugu, Nigeria in 1983 and currently lives and works in Los Angeles. She was awarded Foreign Policy's Leading 100 Global Thinkers of 2015 alongside the Next Generation Prize, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2015. She is the recipient of the Prix Canson Prize, 2016, the Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize, 2015, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum's James Dicke Contemporary Art Prize, 2014. Recent solo exhibitions include *I Refuse to be Invisible*, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach (2016) and *The Beautiful Ones*, Art + Practice, Los Angeles (2015), staged concurrently with a solo presentation at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2015); Akunyili Crosby has recently displayed work at institutional venues including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2016); the New Museum, New York (2015); The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2014); Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (2014); Landcommandery of Alden-Biesen, Bilzen, Belgium (2014); BRIC, New York (2013); Bronx Museum, New York (2013); and the Museum of New Art Detroit (2012). Her work is in the collections of major museums including Yale University Art Gallery, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Tate Modern, The Norton Museum of Art, Zeitz MOCAA, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, MOMA, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

The artist will be in conversation with Zoe Whitley at [Tate Modern](#), Starr Cinema, Thursday 29 September 7pm-8.30pm.

Image: *Super Blue Omo*, 2016. Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida. Purchase acquired through the generosity of Jim and Irene Karp, 2016. © Njideka Akunyili Crosby.

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