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REVIEWS PARIS

## Chris Ofili

David Zwirner | Paris

By Mara Hoberman 



Chris Ofili, *Othello - Shroud*, 2023-24, oil and charcoal on linen, artist frame of carved and charred American black walnut, iron nails, screen print on bamboo silk, 27 5/8 x 23 x 1 7/8".

Chris Ofili presented the ten oil paintings composing “Joyful Sorrow,” his first solo show in Paris, behind individual black-on-black screen-printed curtains. Confronted with these mysterious veils and equipped with black gloves provided at the gallery’s front desk, viewers saw the show by lifting one shroud at a time—performing an intimate act that stimulated the senses and the subconscious all at once. Ofili has long been interested in prolonging or complicating the viewer’s experience, and, in this case, the exercise began even before the first veil was lifted. On each silk cloth, a ghostly apparition—a photographic self-portrait, eyes closed—slowly revealed itself, flickering into view only at close proximity and from certain angles. The works’ black frames, made of charred wood, were carved with elongated bas-relief figures—also intelligible only from up close—as well as the words VENICE and OFILI in looping script. Like mini prosceniums, the dark frames and curtains set the stage for Ofili’s response to Shakespeare’s *Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice*.

Ofili’s engagement with *Othello* dates back to 2019, when he produced linear white-on-black etchings to illustrate an edition of the play published by David Zwirner Books. In stark contrast with these prints, the paintings in “Joyful Sorrow,” all titled *Othello – Shroud* and made between 2019 and 2024, were jewel-toned, mottled, and glistening. In each composition, a multicolored masklike face floats in the center above smaller acrobatically posed figures and loose-script handwriting spelling out OTHELLO. The faces are all similar in size, scaled to match what the viewer would expect to see if there was a mirror behind each curtain instead of a painting.

Each carnivalesque reflection is adorned with dabs and strokes of iridescent paints that suggest bindis, crowns, horns, collars, and other ornamental

accoutrements. Some of these details, such as the massive curling horns, seemed explicit references to *Othello*. Horns often appear in Ofili's work as evocations of Jab Jab, or Blue Devil, a figure from the carnival tradition of Trinidad (the artist's home since 2005). Here, however, the appendages (which sometimes looked very much like a foolscap), recall Iago's unhumorous description of Othello as an "old black ram," a slur that refers to the character's race as well as his presumed cuckoldry, often symbolized by horns. In several paintings, greenish eyes allude to the monstrous role of jealousy in *Othello*, as do the curtains, which could be read as a reference to Desdemona's ill-placed handkerchief.

More than its plot, the paintings addressed the racial politics of Shakespeare's text and its many adaptations for stage and film. If the black curtains and charred frames relate to Othello's dark skin (described in the play as "sooty"), they also evoke the blackface white actors have worn to portray him. In the introduction to the edition of *Othello* that features Ofili's illustrations, poet Fred Moten writes, "Othello is an experiment in black personhood for which black persons are not responsible. . . . How does Ofili now refuse it?" In this context, "Joyful Sorrow" refuses Othello by using color, light, and depth to describe complex identities and hidden truths beneath each black surface.

The theatrical hide-and-seek staging of "Joyful Sorrow" recalled certain of the artist's previous presentations—for instance, the chain-link fence in his 2017 New York exhibition "Paradise Lost," which impeded viewers from fully seeing the paintings installed inside. In Paris, seven years later, similar themes of interiority versus exteriority felt just as acute and even more personal. The private experience of lifting a veil and focusing on one painting at a time was an opportunity to ruminate on hybrid identities and personae. A close and prolonged look at these paintings reveals that they were built up over long periods during which the artist layered many washes of thinned paint. The surfaces have a sheen that, like a varnish, suggests finality, but beneath this, blurred and bleeding colors and forms convey a whole saga of overlay and evolution. Often, faces are split in half, with

features that don't match, suggesting a process: a whole coalescing from multiple contrasting parts. Pushing past Othello's experience as the other, Ofili made way for a gratifying appreciation of self and selves.

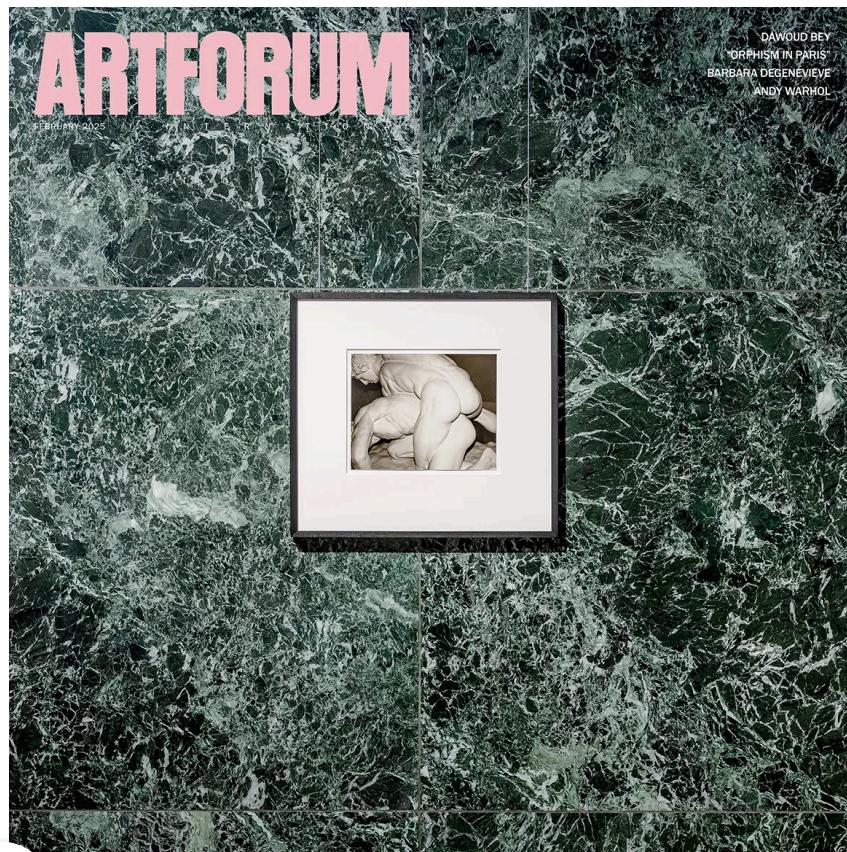
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Andy Warhol, *The Wrestlers*, 1982, gelatin silver print. Installation view, The Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 2024. Photo: David von Becker. © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

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