

VIN VIN

JAMIU AGBOKE

The Argonauts

Solo Exhibition

Inauguration: March, Monday 10; 6 - 8 pm.

Duration: March 12 - April 17, 2025

The Argonauts

*Kissing the stomach
kissing your scarred
skin boat. History
is what you've travelled on
and take with you
- Michael Ondaatje*

There is a moment in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* in which she reflects upon sending an extract of a text by the semiotic philosopher Roland Barthes to her lover. Barthes, whose work as a literary critic denied the centrality of an author's intentions and personal feelings in making sense of their work, might seem like an unusual romantic emissary. And yet it was a passage which relates to the declarative statement that we say perhaps more than any other, if we are lucky enough to live a life in love:

A day or two after my love pronouncement, now feral with vulnerability, I sent you the passage from Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes in which Barthes describes how the subject who utters the phrase "I love you" is like "the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name." Just as the Argo's parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the Argo, whenever the lover utters the phrase "I love you," its meaning must be renewed by each use, as "the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new."¹

Following Nelson, Barthes' capacious metaphor of the Argo (or, more accurately, the ship of Theseus) can help us make sense of more than love, as important as that feeling - and the declarative promise of 'I love you' - can be. For instance, are our own bodies not like Theseus's shape-shifting watercraft?

¹ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville House, 2015), p. 5.

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Are our arms, our legs, our mouths, our eyes really the same from cradle to the grave, even though they share the same name? When we set out to make a piece of work – be that writing a novel that has been smouldering in the back of our mind for years, or the carpentry of a new kitchen table that we have been promising our beloved for even longer – is that work *really* the same in the first hour of its enterprise as against its last? We can land on both sides, as the Athenians did when they debated the question of their ship victoriously travelling home from Crete, and as Plutarch recounted in his biographical *Lives*: ‘They took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.’² All things grow; all things decay. It is a paradox we must hold close as we renew and reaffirm those bonds which tie us to the people and the things that hold meaning in our lives.

Nelson, Barthes, and Theseus: three apposite sailing companions for Jamiu Agboke and his painterly vessels. His new body of work, which bears the title *The Argonauts* as a *homage* to Nelson, is interested in tracking the passages of time in single compositional frames: we find ourselves at the water’s edge, on the boundaries between sea and sky, and cannot help but wonder how they were brought into the world, on copper and aluminium, as we imagine all the transformational interventions of the artist to bring them home. These are works that appear burdened by the sheer materiality of their *métier*: they are undeniably heavy, heavy as metal, but have a delicate finesse to their heaviness. In three works, *Borders*, *Kiss*, and *Sea Meets Land* (all 2025), a rectangular perspective of a landscape or seascape, as though seen through porthole or a camera lucida, is centred amidst a secondary zone of action. In his titles, Agboke situates us beside those liminal spaces where successive voyagers have embarked and returned, tracing the expatriate’s farewell and the prodigal’s homecoming, and are themselves works that carry the very residues of life-affirming expedition.

In *Borders*, this secondary zone suggests another natural space on the outer reaches of the world, perhaps a rugged crag of scrambled peaks set beneath a plush peach sky, whereas in the other two the obstinate metallic surface reflects a dance of light. It is as though we must hold our hand to our forehead and squint to see the coastline through glaring sunshine. By breaking any semblance or logic of a representation of a particular place by hauling an arena of abstraction around it, Agboke crafts luminescent borderlands to act as the landscape’s counterpoint, its rival, its foil.

² Plutarch, as referenced in ‘ship of Theseus’, philosophy entry, *Britannica* <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/ship-of-Theseus-philosophy>> [accessed 4 March 2025].

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This compositional decision does more than merely frame the smaller central picture for our attention – *and so offer a better look at the landscape by giving us something else to look at* – but exists so that we understand its subject as a smaller world in much larger world. It is a perspective that William Blake knew well, when he set the task of writing poetry as seeing ‘a world in a grain of sand’.³ By forensically bedding down on a single subject Agboke reveals all those rules of physics and light and perception which connect his tiny pockets of inlet and downs to everything else. ‘Spirit is matter reduced to an extreme thinness’, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, another line that finds its way into Nelson’s prose, and in these works we can see that extreme thinness play out as matter in both medium and subject.

In *So Close* and *Tenderloin* (both 2025), horizon lines are hemmed into the very upper limit of the work so that the sky and sea kiss, just about, while reminding us of the distances that form between us and the places that we struggle to remember but cannot wholly forget, on the other side of where we are now. In *So Close*, Agboke has wrought, scraped and moulded, like a sculptor poring over their clay, the smouldering blacks of heaving ridges that loom over and protect – *or do they engulf?* – the fairy-green below, where the land meets the water, where the land is lit by twilight’s glow. While the unmistakable shimmer of the finish belies its elemental nature, *Tenderloin* is an ecstatic and exuberant work that operates at the very threshold of landscape and gesture; we can luxuriate in its near pastel hues, earthy tones, and vegetal greens as much as we can identify lake, verge, and coastline flattened out on the plane. *Skin Boat* (2025) is an outlier within my schema. It has no border; there is no land. Its title references a line from a lyric by the Sri Lankan-Canadian poet Michael Ondaatje, which I’ve chosen as my epigraph, in which he imagines his lover’s body as a ‘scarred skin boat’, and he in communion with all the lovers who have taken his place in the past. In Agboke’s picture, the sailboat is far from the shore: it skates over the water so serenely that we can barely catch up with its pace. Look at the interplay of colour: the way the cornflower yellows trip and pirouette with the depths of teal and burnt reds, as though the lightest of things meets the heaviest and we can no longer differentiate between the two. Is this Theseus’ ship transforming before our eyes? Is this a stand-in for the lover’s body when we did not know it, or the painful image of its future without us?

In Cy Twombly’s extraordinary three-panel painting *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)*, which he began in Rome in 1972 and completed in Lexington in 1994, a work which expansively counterposes vast areas of tranquil off-white with the accumulative bursts of season, passion, and loss in crimsons and violets, the artist reflected that the ‘sound of “Asia

³ William Blake, ‘Auguries of Innocence’, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. Erdman, David V. (New York: Anchor Books, 1982), p. 490.

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Minor”’ was ‘really like a rush to me, like a fantastic ideal.’⁴ Inspired by the Roman poet Catullus, who travelled to modern-day Anatolia, flanked on either side by the Black, Aegean and Mediterranean Seas, so that he could see his brother for the last time. In Twombly’s words, ‘while he was there his brother died, and Catullus came back on this little boat. I found the idea of Asia Minor extremely beautiful. Saying goodbye to something and coming back on a boat.’⁵ Twombly’s picture resonates with *Skin Boat* because both artists figure the boat ideogram into a symbol of perpetual movement through land, through life, through love. Agboke’s boat seems to glide, carting its weightless freight, at once a prosaic cargo of today and the shrines transported across the rivers of ancient empires. It is the symbol of embarkment and *nostos* – the Greek word for homecoming by the sea, from which we derive ‘nostalgia’ when partnered with ‘algos’, or pain. *The pain of returning home*. If Barthes was right that Twombly’s scratches, scrawls, and finger-smearred colours are ‘the fragments of an indolence, and this makes them extremely elegant’, then Agboke’s marks embody a kind of *sprezzatura*, or the act of effortless grace when doing difficult things. Where these two artists diverge is at the very moment that we, lost in pareidolia, are confident in identifying Agboke’s marks as figuring a boat at all. Twombly’s ships are themselves elusive, furtive, and already on their way, but they are definitively ships in a way that Agboke’s vessels are not. They are more magical, otherworldly, both entirely of this world and yet stretched out into constellary fragments. ‘Empirically speaking, we are made of star stuff’, Nelson reflects in *The Argonauts*: ‘Why aren’t we talking more about that?’

- Matthew Holman

⁴ Cy Twombly, in David Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 176.

⁵ Cy Twombly, quoted in Serota, *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons* (London: Tate, 2008), p. 50. ‘Boat’ refers to the ‘small yacht, or phaselus’ (Aiken, ed., *The Poems of Catullus*, p. 140) in Catullus’s poem no. 4 (ibid., pp. 145–47).

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Jamiu Agboke (b. 1989, Lagos, Nigeria, lives and works in London) graduated at the Royal Drawing School in April 2022.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Upcoming

- . **May 2025**, Massimo De Carlo Pièce Unique, Paris

Current

- . **March - April 2025**, The Argonauts, VIN VIN Vienna / Naples, Vienna

Recent

- . **October 2024**, *Veils of the Horizon*, VIN VIN Vienna / Naples in collaboration with Siegfried Contemporary, London

Past

- . **April - May 2024**, *If The Ground Could Speak*, Sea View, Los Angeles
- . **February 2024**, *Vertigo*, VIN VIN Vienna / Naples in collaboration with Valerio Polimeno, Paris
- . **November 2023**, *Artissima*, Turin, with VIN VIN Vienna / Naples
- . **May - June 2023**, *Dark Waters*, curated by Sayori Radda, VIN VIN Vienna / Naples, Naples

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Recent

- . **November 2024 - January 2025**, *Cirrus: On Landscapes*, curated by Jenn Ellis, Niso Gallery, London

Past

- . **October 2024**, *Lights On*, curated by Valerio Polimeno, Galerie Chastel Marechal, Paris
- . **May - June 2024**, *Body Symphonies*, alongside George Rouy, Alex Foxtton, Leo Orta, Claire Fahys, Malù Dalla Piccola, John Fou, Shuo Hao, Ricardo Fumanal, Giovanni Bassan, and Bianca Argimón, curated by Nicolas Dewavrin and Marion Guggenheim, Paris
- . **July - September 2023**, *In the shadow*, White Cube, alongside Alia Ahmad, Mona Hatoum, Mary Herbert, Tomas Leth (online)

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- . **May - June 2023**, *A new sensation*, alongside Lydia Blakely, Li Hei Di, László von Dohnányi, Freya Douglas-Morris, Minami Kobayashi, Sofia Nifora, Sophia Loeb, James Owens, James Prapaithong, Joshua Raz, Jill Tate, Serpil Mavi Üstün, and Georg Wilson, Galerie Marguo, Paris
- . **2023**, Project Space, Kane Le Bain
- . **2023**, Jack Barret, New York
- . **2022**, Guts Gallery, London
- . **2022**, The Split Gallery, London
- . **2022**, *The Door in the Wall*, Jamiu Agboke and Joe Bloom, curated by Sayori Radda, CONTRAPPUNTO, project space at VIN VIN Vienna/Naples, Vienna