

Stories take center stage in Toyin Ojih Odutola's drawings. She catches her characters at quiet moments captured from otherwise rich and complex lives. Short on specifics and long on allusion, the narratives she evokes suggest a wide emotional range. We are not meant to know exactly what takes place in these lives, but we are invited into their private spaces and we share an implied intimacy with many of them. Ojih Odutola allows us to peek, but not pry, into the lives of those who occupy her personal firmament. The artist establishes a compassionate confrontation between viewer and subject through the use of scale and through her extraordinary mark-making technique that draws us close to her surfaces. Many of the drawings are life-sized, some even full-length. This reinforces an uncanny sense that we share a space with her subjects; it also establishes an equivalence between viewer and subject.

Ojih Odutola's signature drawing technique rewards close scrutiny. She creates small patches of color from carefully hatched lines to show skin; each plane works to delineate the exposed volumes of her sitter's body. This technique is notably reserved for the depiction of skin; she draws clothes, furniture, and even the landscape in a looser, more broadly marked technique.

It is, after all, flesh that carries conceptual weight in Ojih Odutola's work. It is dark, rich, and multi-hued, and her renderings are very detailed. The people she draws have lives, houses, family, friends, and responsibilities, but those factors are indicated loosely. In this way, she poses questions about how we construct conceptions of race and how those conceptions shape experience—both real and imagined. Her work is elaborate, provocative, poetic, and charged—simultaneously telling and asking.

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