

Silver Eye

Gallery Guide
May 7–Jul 17, 2021



Infinite Essence Mikael Owunna

About the Artist

Mikael Owunna is a queer Nigerian-Swedish American multi-media artist and engineer based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Exploring the intersections of visual media with engineering, optics, Blackness, and African cosmologies, his work seeks to elucidate an emancipatory vision of possibility that pushes Black people beyond all boundaries, restrictions, and frontiers.

Owunna's work has been exhibited across Asia, Europe, and North America and been collected by institutions such as the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Equal Justice Initiative, Duke University, and National Taiwan Museum. His work has also been featured in media ranging from the New York Times to CNN, NPR, VICE, and The Guardian. He has lectured at venues including Harvard Law School, World Press Photo (Netherlands), Tate Modern (UK), and TEDx. Owunna's first published monograph *Limitless Africans* was released in 2019 by FotoEvidence.

About the Writer

Dr. Marques Redd is the Senior Director of Graduate Advising and Engagement for the Humanities at the University of Pittsburgh. He received his A.B. in Social Studies and African & African American Studies from Harvard University and his Ph.D. in English from the University of California-Berkeley. He has worked as a Visiting Professor at Texas State University (English) and the University of Notre Dame (Africana Studies) and as an Assistant Professor at Marquette University (English). His peer-reviewed articles have centered on issues in the fields of African American literature, British Romanticism, global literature, and African cosmology.

Prior to arriving at the University of Pittsburgh, Redd was the Assistant Dean of Instruction and Student Affairs at the University of California-Berkeley College of Natural Resources. In addition to this work in higher education administration, Redd spent two years as the founder and managing partner of an LLC that provided a wide range of editorial and publication services and content creation for animation and media projects.

That Blackness is Most Black: Mikael Owunna's Infinite Essence

Upon glancing at photographs from Mikael Owunna's *Infinite Essence* series, you will immediately be enraptured by the incandescent figures that loom large in the center of these images, with gleaming surfaces of flesh that seem struck with the residue of cosmic effluvia. Seeing these subjects is a powerful reminder that most of the elements that make up the human body (carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen, among others) were forged in the cauldrons of distant stars and ejected across galaxies in massive explosions. There are also intimations here of how primordial Africans invented time itself through observation of celestial bodies and divined the meaning of time through mythical depictions of figures superimposed upon star constellations in the night sky. In the specific works chosen for this exhibition - *Amma's Womb*, *Amma Emerges from His Womb*, and *Amma Creates the World, Molding the Po* - Owunna unfolds an emancipatory vision powered by a clarity of purpose, cognitive power, and aesthetic splendor that seeks to push Black people (and our understandings of Blackness) beyond all limits, boundaries, and frontiers.

Owunna is weaving a spell even in the choice of the three titles, with their emphasis on gestation, emergence, and creation. These images are a proclamation of living and being that stand as a bulwark against the universe of death that surrounds us in 21st-century America. *Infinite Essence* is formed, in part, in reaction to the incessant flow of images of Black people both dead and dying, murdered by vigilantes and state actors. Particularly egregious was the 2014 case of Michael Brown, a Black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri, who was shot and killed by a white police officer. Amplifying the horrific nature of Brown's public execution, the media published and widely distributed the image of his young, teenage body without the consent of his family. Though I cannot remember ever seeing such a public display of a dead white body, I fight becoming numb to seeing the circulation of images of Black death. *Infinite Essence* is a response to the question: How can the Black body be transfigured from a site of violent death and disposability into a vehicle of transcendence, into a cosmic vessel of the divine?

Owunna does this through exploring indigenous African understandings of Blackness as a cosmological concept not reducible to the flat sociopolitical meanings that have accrued to it. Blackness is the formless void of potentiality from which everything emerges; it is the

hidden link connecting the depths of outer space, the womb, and the primeval ocean; it is the doorway to the collective unconscious, genius, and spiritual illumination; it is the power that can be accessed to create new worlds to blot out the one in which we live. Blackness is all of this at once and more, and *Infinite Essence* moves with/toward/in each of these ideas.

More specifically, Owunna's work is grounded in the recovery, modernization, and extension of traditional African knowledge systems, sacred sciences that are poetically rendered systems of spiritual and scientific principles organized around the goal of divinizing human consciousness. Drawing on their influence, Owunna similarly fuses art, science, and religion to provide a vehicle for Black transfiguration. Although more could be chosen, I will only focus here on the influence of the cosmologies of the Igbo and Dogon people, who respectively live in Nigeria and Mali. Igbo cosmology provides inspiration for Infinite Essence's title and visual style, and Dogon cosmology provides the narrative underpinning.

In his essay "Chi in Igbo Cosmology," Chinua Achebe discusses the elusive concept of chi, which has been translated as god, guardian angel, personal spirit, soul, spirit-double, and daylight. He puts forward a unique thesis: the chi is "an infinitesimal manifestation of [Supreme Deity] Chukwu's infinite essence given to each of us separately and uniquely, a single ray from the sun's boundless radiance." The chi, then, is the spirit body that supports the realization that our Self is one with divinity and facilitates our experience of unity between all things. (In traditional African speculation, the human is a complex aggregation of spirit bodies that live in multiple dimensions and have different lifespans from mortal to immortal.) Owunna's images seek to document this occult anatomy and capture a vision of the chi, the infinitesimal piece of infinite essence.

He approaches this goal through scientific study of light and darkness. Ultraviolet light is not visible to the human eye, so it is used as a medium to visualize a unity that is unseeable. Owunna leveraged the training gained from an undergraduate degree in engineering to augment a standard flash with an ultraviolet bandpass filter so that it would only pass ultraviolet light. He hand painted the nude bodies of Black models with fluorescent paints that only glow under ultraviolet light and photographed them in total darkness. Using this method, when the shutter is clicked, for a fraction of a second, bodies are illuminated as the universe. From Primordial Blackness, the infinite essence of life emerges.

These photographs are printed through dye sublimation on aluminum sheets. This material choice amplifies the power of these cosmological images through invoking millennia of West African metallurgy traditions, embodied in figures like the 9th-century CE Igbo bronze casters of Igbo-Ukwu. Blacksmiths were powerful figures because they, through their hammering, bending, and twisting of metals into a plethora of forms and objects, symbolically reproduced the earliest work of creation, which saw Primordial Blackness (undifferentiated energy/matter) morph into all of the shapes of the world. Owunna, then, joins himself to lineages of African artisans (stretching back to the Creator) and summons the memory of the social structures and civilizations that supported their sacred work.

Owunna is also joined to lineages of Igbo healers. His maternal grandfather, Dr. Fabian Udekwu, conducted the first open-heart surgery in West Africa, and Udekwu's maternal grandfather, Anuntu, was one



Images from left to right: *Amma Creates the World, Molding the Po*; *Amma Emerges from His Womb*

of the most acclaimed dibias and masters of traditional medicine and divination from Abagana in southeast Nigeria. Infinite Essence does healing work as well by reviving timeless archetypes and returning us to cosmic contexts that we have forgotten.

Many of the archetypes Owunna uses are drawn from Dogon cosmology, which we can think of as a map that simultaneously outlines the unfolding of creation, the structure of matter, the process of reproduction, the organization of the human spirit, and a systematic paradigm for transforming a human into a divine being. Owunna's images illustrate three important moments from this intricately complex system, which I will outline briefly. Dogon cosmology is grounded in the figure Amma, who can be thought of as a personification of Primordial Blackness, the eternal, unconditioned realm underlying all creation. As this Blackness contains no and all genders, Amma is an androgynous figure, often referred to as he but whose body is alternatively imagined as an egg and womb. In Them is housed 2 master-signs, 8 guide-signs, and 256 complete signs of the world, signs that will direct the formation of the world. Capturing a figure in a fetal position in a moment of stasis and contemplation, Owunna's *Amma's Womb* transports us to this sacred place at the moment before the universe has taken on material form.

Owunna's *Amma Emerges from His Womb* brings in fluidity and motion to depict a subsequent stage of creation. The figure's eyes are now open, which mirrors the opening of Amma's eyes, the moment They become conscious of Themselves as Infinite Potential. With this self-consciousness, Amma can "emerge from his womb," or begin differentiating Themselves into the things of the world so that They can have experience. Appropriately, the image seems both full and empty, and the figure's angular pose flags that Amma's emergence happens in a spiral form, with whirling and spinning to become the model for all future creation.

In *Amma Creates the World, Molding the Po*, we see Amma with the first complete work to emerge from the universe's womb - a tiny seed called the po, which can be thought of as a structure akin to an atom, a crucial building block of matter. Amma's creative will and the 266 fundamental signs are placed in the po, which will germinate and grow into all things, including galaxies, stars, planets, and ourselves. Therefore, this image, like the series as a whole, is one of power, as it provides a vehicle for the unification of ourselves and the cosmic frameworks we live in. As we are one with Amma, a fact often obscured and repressed, we can

create and bring new worlds into being, regardless of our current social contexts, through an understanding of and conjuring with the Primordial Blackness that subsists beneath the objective world. And we can create with Black bodies that are filled with a luminous divinity.

Far from exhausting the infinite meanings of Owunna's *Infinite Essence*, I have only talked about traveling to the deepest past to view the creation of the universe. Yet with this work, you can also peer into the furthest future to glimpse a moment when humanity has transcended its limited form in order to live in the cosmos. If you look closely, you will find Owunna waiting for you there.

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