

HOME

Panel Discussion / Roots in the Sky

On Sat 11 Oct 2025 several of the artists from *Roots in the Sky*, Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, Jade de Montserrat, Elena Njoabuzia Onwochei-Garcia and Shaquéelle Whyte, took part in a panel discussion examining the themes in the exhibition. It was chaired by esteemed writer and art historian Aurella Yussuf.

Roots in the Sky is the first institutional curatorial project by British-Nigerian artist **Tunji Adeniyi-Jones**. This pivotal exhibition brings together new and recent works by ten contemporary artists whose practices span the United States, Europe, and West Africa.

Taking Adeniyi-Jones's own practice as a point of departure - rich with West African heritage, fable, and ceremonial symbolism - the exhibition explores the cultural pluralism and layered identities that define the Black diaspora. Painting, sculpture, and drawing are employed in equal measure, with figuration and abstraction operating as shared visual languages to explore themes of mythology, community, lineage, and transformation.

The works on view are informed by both personal narrative and collective memory. As novelist Bernardine Evaristo writes, "We consist of multiples... descended as we are in Britain from fifty-four African countries and over thirty Caribbean countries... I believe in pluralism versus essentialism, always and all ways." This ethos underpins *Roots in the Sky*, inviting artists to reflect on travel, hybridity, and the diasporic experience as a source of both creative expression and cultural logic.

Boundless interconnectivity—at times latent, at times boldly asserted—runs through the exhibition. The featured artists engage with questions of belonging and identity, resisting reductive narratives in favour of nuance, contradiction, and multiplicity. Their practices are further anchored by literary influences from James Baldwin, Chinua Achebe, and Teju Cole—writers who, like the artists, trace and reimagine diasporic pathways through acts of cultural reckoning and creative resistance.

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones · Alvaro Barrington · Jade de Montserrat · Ivy Kalungi · Joy Labinjo · Sahara Longe · Nengi Omuku · Elena Njoabuzia Onwochei-Garcia · Tschabalala Self · Shaquéelle Whyte

Credit: *Roots in the Sky* is curated by Tunji Adeniyi-Jones and developed with Clarissa Corfe, Creative Producer: Visual Art, HOME.

CLARISSA CORFE: Good morning, everybody. Thank you for joining us this morning for the panel discussion for *Roots in the Sky*. We launched the exhibition last night. I hope you've had the chance to have a look around the exhibition already. If you haven't, we have the install images on the screen behind the speakers, so you'll know what we're talking about.

Tunji Adeniyi-Jones was born in London and lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He's had solo exhibitions throughout the world, and his work is held in countless public and private collections. In 2023, he undertook the G.A.S. residency as part of the Yinka Shonibare Foundation in Nigeria. He received his bachelor's in fine art from the Ruskin in Oxford, followed by an MFA in painting and printmaking from the Yale School of Art.

Jade de Montserrat. Her work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions throughout the UK and the US, and she was the recipient of the Stuart Hall Foundation scholarship supporting her PhD and the development of her work from a Black diasporic perspective in the north of England. In 2023, she co-launched Soul of Fire Artists' Charcoal with the aim of making material accessible to schools and communities. She is a tutor at Ruskin School of Art in Oxford and lecturer in fine art painting at the Slade School of Fine Art.

Nengi Omoku is based in Lagos, Nigeria, and London. She's had solo exhibitions throughout Europe, US and Africa in Nigeria, and her work is included in public and private collections around the world. She studied art at the Slade School of Fine Art and subsequently trained as a horticulturalist and florist under her mother. The natural world, European Impressionist painting and her mother's landscape practise are a source of inspiration for her work.

Elena Onwochei-Garcia is based in Glasgow and has exhibited in the UK and across Europe. Her work has been selected for the ACS Studio Prize, Bloomberg New Contemporaries and the Leverhulme Master of Fine Art bursary, and her practise is shaped by mixed race experience, drawing on moments of tension and contradiction inherent to living between identities and recurring confrontations with authenticity.

Shaqu'elle Whyte lives and works in London. His work has been included in exhibitions in the UK and throughout Europe. His work is included in public and private collections in the UK and the US. His work engages with notions of male masculinity and the body, and his imagined environments featuring everyday interiors or scenarios have an enigmatic atmosphere and emotional charge attributed to the psychoanalytic approach to his work.

And finally, our chair for this morning, Aurella Yussuf is a writer and art historian focusing on the work of Black artists in Britain and beyond. Her writing has appeared in *Frieze*, *Hyperallergic*, *RA Magazine* and other publications. She's worked with organisations including Tate, Whitechapel Gallery, Photoworks, Hauser & Wirth, Glasgow School of Art, and more. Her research focuses on the relationship between

art institutions, art practise and Black artists, and she's interested in how Black artists form community and create spaces outside of our institutions and how those spaces can be generative for working and critical thinking. I'm not going to talk anymore because time is tight and we only have two hours for this morning, so I'm going to hand straight over to Aurella. Thank you.

AURELLA YUSSUF: Thanks, Clarissa. So I'm going to start with some reflections on the show which opened yesterday evening. I was really struck by something that Tunji said at the preview about this kind of sense of community and presence among Black artists that exists now in Britain in a way that simply didn't a decade ago, and how that absence at the time was part of the reason that you left the UK for the US. And it made me think about how *Roots in the Sky* speaks to that shift and to this emergence of a community that's not only visible but interconnected and intellectually alive and shaping its own context of exchange. And that kind of community hasn't always been available to Black artists in Britain. And earlier this week, I'd been at an exhibition of the Guyanese sculptor Donald Locke, and he was living and working in Britain during the 1960s and 70s, and one of the archival documents in that show was a letter from the gallery director of a 1978 exhibition of Afro Caribbean art and the letter read, 'being the first of its kind, the exhibition has had to be an exploratory venture. Its main purpose was to discover which young Black artists are working in Britain today, in the hope that the resulting exhibition would help to stimulate and promote the development of such artists. The rarity of such exhibitions underlines the lack of opportunity for these artists who expose their work to genuine criticism and evaluation, for it is only when that can happen freely and often enough that Black artists in Britain could be expected to make a meaningful contribution as part of the main currents in the common artistic endeavour.' So that was from 1978, and that phrase 'to make a meaningful contribution as part of the main currents' really stayed with me. And it speaks to the limited opportunities that Black artists historically had to participate fully in the mainstream art world. And when they did, it was often in isolation and Locke also ended up leaving Britain for the United States and ended up settling in Atlanta, where he found this kind of artistic community and critical exchange that had been missing. So it wasn't just about making work, but also convening, thinking alongside other Black artists and that kind of dialogue and intellectual exchange, the ability to test ideas in community and to be sharpened by the presence of others like yourself, has always been a vital part of diasporic artistic practise. And that's what feels so significant about *Roots in the Sky* taking place here now, because it represents not only visibility, which is something that is often talked about, but also the kind of interconnection this living network of artists whose practises are in conversation with each other across geography, across generation and across medium. And you can feel this strong sense of dialogue in *Roots in the Sky*, not only between the artists themselves, many of whom already know each other, but also across the ideas that their work engages. There are several recurring themes that emerge, the negotiation of selfhood and individuality, the exploration of interiority, the ways that memory and

the passage of time shape both personal and collective experience. Also history, both personal and cultural, and mythology. These things also appear throughout the works, often intertwined with the human form and the natural world, creating a rich interplay of narrative, symbol and materiality. I'm going to talk about some of the details of those artworks and those practises a bit later on in the conversation. But I think what's really important is that these threads connect the works without flattening any of the distinct voices, and they allow each of the artists to occupy their own space while remaining in conversation with one another. So the result is a constellation of perspectives. It's layered, it's nuanced, and it's expansive. What I found really powerful about the curation was its restraint, and it resists this institutional impulse that we often see to over explain or to frame the artist ethnographically, which is something that has historically flattened and over determined how Black artists are presented in group shows. Instead, there's this kind of understatedness in how the exhibition is held, a quiet confidence and the relationships between the works are allowed to unfold slowly through proximity and spacing, rather than through a kind of didactic framing, and it encourages this kind of slow and sort of contemplative relationship between the viewer and the work. I think there's a real generosity to that approach and also a kind of confidence in the audience, and you can see in the way that the works are given room to breathe in the scale of the actual works themselves, but also in the spatial rhythm of the galleries. So each piece has its own integrity, even as it sits in conversation with the others, and it doesn't feel overcrowded or forced into cohesion. And so returning to Tunji's point about what is happening in the present moment, I think what we're witnessing goes far beyond simple representation. But it's about the creation of artistic ecosystems, spaces of thought and care and critique that sustain artists, allow for experimentation, complexity and also refusal. And I think that *Roots in the Sky* holds that really beautifully and it creates a space of communion without collapsing difference. And it allows both the rootedness and also the expansiveness of diasporic practise to coexist.

TUNJI ADENIYI-JONES: Thank you so much. Yeah, that feels great to hear. I think that's touching on a lot of the meaningful aspects of why I wanted to put this show together. I guess I'll start by saying there is some pretty clear and obvious almost proofs of concept that are happening right now outside of this show beyond Manchester. I'm thinking in particular about Kerry James Marshall at the Royal Academy, because when I left I'd never heard of Kerry James Marshall. When I studied at the Ruskin and when I studied in art school, I didn't know anything about Lubaina Himid, Denzil Forrester, Frank Bowling, these people who've been around in the UK doing incredible work. I was kind of shown very specific history, so I was pretty put off by the lack of what I perceived was missing. Of course it wasn't missing, I just wasn't facing that direction. So for there to be a Kerry James show and then us to be doing the show at the same time is I think the part where things progress a bit because there will always be a standout exhibition by a master in an institution but for there also to be a kind of show that's a bit more contemporary like

this where we're finding our paths in real time, and I think that's what's really nice about the work is you kind of see how we're all thinking and how we're all on this journey. And we certainly haven't figured it all out yet, which is a nice thing that we can all share as well. You can see that we're all thinking about things. And as a young art student, that's why you want to go and see exhibitions with other artists who are thinking about things, as well as those who have figured it out and have completely arrived at a point. And I saw the Kerry James show, sensational show, but I think if I was 20 or 21 seeing that I would see it and be amazed and then also I'd be looking and thinking more broadly like, "OK, what else is happening here? What else is happening there?" I would want to see more, so I'm really happy that we can put on a show like this that can exist in the same time and moment and speak to a bit more of a breadth of what the practise of a Black artist can be through various stages of the career. Yeah, it's an exciting moment. I'm happy to have everyone here. I'm happy to have all the other artists here and to see everyone kind of feel fulfilled by this show. I spoke to everyone at length over the years in the build up to this because it has taken three years for us to get here and I took all of that into account. I think a lot of people responded to the title when they were making the work too, which is nice. So you can see that thread coming through. In terms of the title itself, I like a lot of literature. I read a lot of Black American West African literature, things like this. I really like, you know, catchy titles like some of the more obvious ones like *Things Fall Apart* and stuff like that. So *Roots in the Sky* is my attempt at coming up with a more fictional literature title that is encapsulating this kind of story that the exhibition is. It was going to be hard for me to fill that out myself and to resolve it all myself so I'm glad everyone else could help add layers to that story.

AY: Thank you. I'm going to start with a question for you, Tunji. When you were conceptualising and curating this show how did you resist having a really fixed single narrative and allow space for multiplicity?

TAJ: I think that part was actually the easiest part because my daily life involves that. I think people are never quite sure where I am, whether I'm here or if I'm in New York, and it's true that I actually move around a lot. I'm not really fixed in either space. And so to me it feels significant when I'm in New York and I see an exhibition by Nengi that was made in Nengi's studio in Lagos, and I'll see an exhibition by Sahara, whose work was made in London and vice versa, Alvaro is making work from America, but he's having a Tate Britain solo show, he's doing work at Notting Hill Carnival, he's kind of representing the Black British identity more than anything else. It was beginning to become clear to me that there just weren't really parameters for these things in such a way that I'd grown to understand and that we could step in and out and collaborate across all these different kinds of spaces and definitions, so that part was actually really easy because my own natural curiosity has drawn me to these people separately, I'm a fan of all their work. I mean, it should be said that if the audience doesn't know, although I imagine you might, we as artists all really

enjoy each other's work a lot. We all fan out on each other's work a lot. We're always just staring at it online, we really enjoy it. And I think there's not always a lot of opportunities where you'll have a show where you get to see so many of us with each other's work and stuff like that, so it's also just a point of appreciation for the others, everyone else. I'm invested in expressing that multiplicity as I've come to learn more about my Britishness since living in America and learn more about my Nigerianness since moving between all three places. And like this example you gave before from the sculptor, there've been many artists who've been making these kinds of transitions. Frank Bowling also moved to America at some point in the 70s or 80s.

AY: And opening it up to all of the artists here, one of the themes throughout the exhibition is ideas about lineage and cultural memory and you've all sort of touched on that in different ways. How does that concept of memory and inheritance flow throughout your work?

SHAQUÉLLE WHYTE: Looks like I'm going for it. For me, memory is something that like ... I consider myself an unreliable narrator within my own work, and so when I consider memory, it's always a question of did I get this right? In a good way, because what it means is that as I'm making work, you then get to question the idea of what something is, so you go in with an idea of a work and you end up questioning it to a point where it becomes something completely different and it becomes more than the initial idea, and especially when you're dealing with the Black body and ideas around family. If I'm the centre of my work and the centre of the universe which I'm trying to create, then Blackness is inherent, right? And so to pull that into different spaces of what this means, especially within all spaces that I've been in, the schools, the very white schools, the very white art school, then XYZ and I think memory is just like a device which you can use to delineate the way in which your work is read, if only for you, because I'm a figurative painter and I find that figurative painting sometimes can be seen as quite ... OK, we've got a thing and it's here and I think when you consider memory and the facets in which you can pull it apart and put it back together, it means that painting can become this infinite thing that exists within its own language and of which you're then able to keep reestablishing what is truth and what is lie and embed new ideas into your own discourse. And I think that's one of the main reasons why it's been so interesting to be alongside everybody else. It feels like everybody's in their own internal discourse, within their own practise, and so seeing my work alongside everybody else there's a kinship that then happens between two that evolves into something even better.

ELENA NJOABUZIA ONWOCHEI-GARCIA: I was just going to say that my background was more in history and art history, and then I moved to do a Masters in fine art so I was always quite interested in how history just reflects on the now and that we can always bring that as a way of considering where we can go forward as well. But I think in a very present way in my practise, history is there because I've always felt identities are very unstable concepts and they're always built through ... You've got the history, the idea and the projections that people have, and then how

they interact with others. And so I think identity is always formed by these elements and this has really driven or has really contributed to how I use collage in my practise. I don't know how many of you have gone to see the exhibition yet, but I make the large paintings just as you enter and if you go to the backs of the paintings, you can see this quite yellow paper I use to paint on, but when I'm building my compositions what I do is I create lots and lots of drawings and then I begin to collage them together and these drawings are from art history, popular culture and then I begin to piece them together so you kind of get all the characters, almost Frankenstein elements. And so you'd be able to see, for example, in one of the paintings you've got the legs of one of the figures from an illustrated book of Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit. But then you've got Rubens next to it and I think there was a crocodile from Hadrian's Villa and they're all suddenly brought into one context and I think when bringing these fragments together you have to move in between them quite a lot. And I think you as the viewer, you don't necessarily have to know the references, I think there's almost an intuition when we see these elements but I think often there's a fear when we come to referencing history or bringing in collage that it might become a bit stilted or still or lose its energy. And I think by bringing these fragments together they have to respond to one another, but also in the way we as artists, when you're drawing or when you're painting, you alter the gesture and you alter the element in the painting. For example, there's the crocodile, which you might see in one of the paintings, which in its original form is this prowling, quite predatory creature. But then as I've responded to that history, I've turned it up on its belly and with that gesture it becomes different. And I think I quite like that kind of inception of history, changing the meanings and bringing in new elements.

NENGI OMUKU: Well, I guess in thinking about history within my practise, I sort of start with the surface and the fabric I work with. I work with a precolonial textile called sanyan from Nigeria and it dates as far back as the 19th century. And when I saw it for the first time, I had a weird sense, it was almost like a spiritual connection with it and I felt a weird sense of kinship with the surface. And what then happened for me was thinking about how to integrate into the language of the history of art this very Nigerian substance, and bring it into this history of art that is, you know, mostly talked about in general as quite Western and quite different to what we experience in Nigeria. That is the grounding element for my practise, and I think within the paintings I'm looking at archival images from Nigeria, I'm looking at archival photography, and thinking about Nigeria within a historical lens and also our contemporary present experience. And I'm trying to merge these things together on the surface, this heightened moment where art and craftsmanship was so elevated, and the chaos we experience now in Nigeria, and see how these things can speak to each other on the surface as well as imagining other futures and what life could look like within the paintings and in the way I lean towards the natural world.

JADE DE MONTSERRAT: Yeah, I'll try and articulate as best I can, because obviously my mind is now fizzing from everything everyone's said. Starting from the

beginning the idea of questioning memory in my work and in life generally I'm sort of grappling with unearthing histories pertaining to our British culture and where my work and my peers' work sits within that history and the lineage while being gas lit around a British understanding of race and where our histories are almost allowed to be unearthed. You were talking about our education and that's throughout our educational careers, I think. So this idea of memory and inheritance and the fluidity there is punctured by histories of trauma and then thinking how the work that I make is working through that in a sort of embodied way, because I love making, it feels really good and also speaking to a future, there are structural impulses referenced within the work that I make and I posit that all of us are invested in that, in wanting to heal, love what we do and be able to do it on a regular basis and make a difference for future generations who I suggest also need to make. We need to be creative, it's a human need and drive, so that's where memory and inheritance sit for me and it's almost like a release. I'm very lucky to be able to do what I do, and I want other people to experience that en masse.

AY: Thank you. Something that occurs across all of your practises is the appearance of the body in lots of different ways. How do you think about the way that the body is sort of visible or vulnerable within your work, and also sometimes what it kind of signifies or represents in terms of how it appears to the outside world, to the audience and the different types of gaze that it can be subject to.

SW: This is a really interesting one for me, especially at the moment in my practise. In my work at the moment I'm using a lot of the Black figure and a lot of nudity exists within the work. But I try for it not to be, very specifically, in a non-sexualizing way and that's more because I want the body just to be. In modern culture, especially in the West, the commoditization of the Black figure, male and female, is in a way where it's sexualized, appropriated, sold, in a way where we don't have agency over our own selves. Which then makes a weird dichotomy between the way that I then end up using the body because I don't paint myself. The way I describe my work, I use figures as characters almost in place of myself, telling stories that could be true, could not be true, considering past, present, future, so on and so forth. The relationship that I then have to the figures that I use is very much from found imagery, from my own photography, then you come to the canvas and it all falls apart and it's sort of like, OK, shit, we're going to make a painting here. But the point is, as of recently, using the Black body it was something that had to be a thing ... Before now I've used works where, as I said before, Blackness is the centre of my life and it's something that I am and something that I always will be, but a multi-racial language existed within my work more because I knew that once I made work that depicted Black bodies very explicitly, I knew that that was it, that's what the work was going to be. And going to shows you see amazing artists, but I never wanted my work to serve. I wanted it to serve transcendently through a point of I am Black and people find something through that because I am telling something about my understanding and probably failing, but in that failing then learning for the next time

because it needs room for failure. And I feel sometimes the Black artist isn't given room to fail, especially using the Black body, because of what it has to do to be able to fill in the gaps of history in spaces where we didn't actually ask to be admitted. We want to be in those spaces, but it's not as if we took ourselves out of the equation in the first place. But it is then somehow my responsibility to then make sure that all the gaps are filled because all of a sudden people feel bad, these political things happen. And so I've then got to fix that and that's quite hard and so hence the reason why using the Black body is sort of like being a thing where, like, OK, can't really do it, we're going to go for it. And it's been quite therapeutic. It's been freeing only because it was almost like, why have I been waiting so long? This is for me and I think that's the thing. It's realising, at least for myself, I won't speak for anybody else, but that the work is for me first and foremost, just means that everything afterwards is for everybody else to pick up the slack on. And that's not to say I'm trying to make work which is in your face and shouting at people. I'm not trying to shout at nobody, we want peace, but at the same time, I'm not trying to placate the viewer, and neither should the Black body in works. And I think it's not their responsibility to do anything for you, but it is doing everything, it is talking about all the things in which we ... I know I went to the Kerry James Marshall show and it was absolutely beautiful and so political, but when you've got a whole show ... I'm sorry, I'm rambling, but Kerry James Marshall show, absolutely phenomenal, listened to *This Cultural Life* thing talking about what do you think about the Smithsonian taking works out of their collections in order to make America look great, get rid of the atrocities that have been committed in the name of the white man in that country, and he was very reluctant to respond. And initially was a bit like, I don't really get it. And I was speaking to someone the other day, everything the man wants to say is in the show, you know what I mean? It's not his responsibility to sit there on a 60-minute podcast and tell you anything that's not there. Go see the show and go look. And I suppose it's to say I'm still learning how to navigate these spaces and navigate how I go about using the works. When using those works I feel as if there's certain things that are like staunch and just fact for me. But then after that it means that we can have fun, we can figure out things and go from there. And that's how I see the Black body. It's not something to be scared of, it's something which is freeing and amazing and doesn't have to be this thing where we're walking with placards. But ultimately, at a base level, knows its own smoke from the beginning from when the painting is presented to you. But it is fun.

AY: Just wanted to pick up on a theme that came out with you talking about your own work and also about Kerry James Marshall's response and maybe you all have some thoughts on this, but there's a strong sense of refusal to either be kind of boxed into making things in a particular way or also shying away from making particular work because of how it might be received and, you know, just focusing on, like you said, it's first and foremost for you, but also with Kerry James Marshall, not wanting to respond to those type of questions because it's already present in the work. How do you feel about having that agency to have this refusal to what is expected of you

both in your work, but also how you present yourself and how you talk about the work?

TAJ: That's the power and freedom of fiction and being able to work within the fantasy or magical realism or these spaces that are collaged or composites of things that we've seen, is that you get to put the pure raw feeling, emotion and experience into the work without it needing to be so easily identifiable with specific indicators that can so easily be reduced and taken down. And I think Shaq makes an excellent point. Through my decade in America, I've learned and seen quite a few things, and one of the things that stood out to me the most is that you can sometimes be given a title, only for it to very quickly be stripped away and taken down. And by title I mean seeming space or authority or agency, or a label, or something that's a very quickly understood conceptual narrative of Black figurative painting. It's in a certain fashion and then it's out of a certain fashion. I also imagine he would have a similar response to that kind of conversation because he's been making work like this for how many decades, so of course he exists outside of those kinds of conversations. I think for him, he notices how - him being Kerry James - how shallow the nature of some of our recent conversations around art and history have been, not by our own doing as Shaq so brilliantly said, it's not our fault that these kind of shallow conversations get attached to our practises, but it is certainly our job to sidestep them a bit and allow ourselves to exist in spaces like this, in exhibitions like this, where you really can't have that kind of narrative around a show like this. You look at Shaq's painting next to Alvaro's painting, it's like they're both figurative. They're both abstract. You can't have a very reductive conversation about the work. Even Elena's work, Nengi's work, it's everything at once, and I'll pause that and come back to the conversation around the body, because I actually wanted to ask Jade a question. I really, really enjoy your work that's the closest to mine, and I was just curious to hear you speak a little bit about the silhouette and how you feel that as a tool can be utilised in relation to what we're talking about, because I love using the silhouette. I think there's also a really expansive history of artists using the silhouette to address some of the issues that Shaq was describing about how over sexualized the body can be in certain contexts, and how to embolden it and give it authority and autonomy without subjecting it to other things. So I was wondering what the silhouette meant to you when you're making your imagery.

JDM: Thank you so much for your question. Yeah. I was just thinking then about Kara Walker's work and how actually again, the politics of her work, speaking through a silhouette is super interesting because it's what's not said or what's left out that prompts you to think about histories again from one specific context now and how affecting they are. The silhouette that I use, the torso, has allowed me to carry symbols within it, so it's a motif that I've used since about 2003 when I had my first studio at Crescent Arts in Scarborough and I made, was thinking through Josephine Baker, and which allowed me to think about my own subjectivity so I could distance myself from trauma, essentially, and that I hadn't had the opportunity to think through

as a strategy for survival, I guess. I was new to thinking about transatlantic slavery and empire building and imperialism, colonialism, so the torso allowed me to read around those histories and start making connections that I now understand, leads me to thinking about reproductive rights and but also around gender. So intersecting concerns, I guess, so it's not quite clear in these works they're kind of genderless or androgynous, so that's how I've been using the silhouette, and I know it's kind of also provocative in that focusing in on the sort of pubis area, there's a discomfort around that and I won't avoid the fact that there is a baby on my breast, we can all see that. And speaking to your question of the silhouette, in particularly this torso, what's been really interesting having Otto is that a question that we all use, and I've been guilty of this in the past, is that you immediately ask, "Oh, a girl or a boy?" Which is, you know, basically people asking about genitalia. And then you can see people then wanting to ... it leads to the next question, which is around the sort of makeup of your child, you know, and in the real world we're having to field speculation around our sense of belonging in terms of these intersecting identification markers, but the torso is sort of opaque in that way. It's not explicit in the work itself, but I know that I'm trying to grapple with these very explicit concerns in everyday life and historically, inequities in gender or class or race.

TAJ: Thank you for that answer, I think that's why I wanted to do this show because if someone was to ask me how I feel about the silhouette, I feel like you've described it more colourfully than I could and you've helped me understand why I've been utilising the tool to kind of process experiences and traumas that I've had and that using the body in this way in my work has offered me a lot. But hearing you speak about that has been really, really useful to help me think through experiences that I've had moving to America and then having to deal with how America treats Black bodies, how America treats people who look like us. It's so vastly different to here. And it's an energy that just kind of engulfs you. And I wasn't really able to articulate that in words, but I started making paintings about it, right. But like everything you've said speaks to that, it's quite amazing how that can happen and how we can help each other fill in blanks like that.

ENOG: That was interesting listening to all of you talk, really powerful ideas coming through. And I just wanted to follow up on what Jade was saying, and because I think something that does drive my practise is as a mixed race person, you're often confronted with an idea of authenticity and people finding the way you look quite ambiguous or not what they expect a mixed-race person to look like, and they can respond if they've been defrauded in some way. I think when I began my practise, I was really looking for references and Jade was one, and Adrian Piper, and I came across the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, who I'd really recommend anyone to read, and she had this idea of the mestiza consciousness, which is this idea of an identity which is a very complex identity because it's born in between different worlds, identities, concepts. And because of that they have to confront a lot of these cultures and work in between them. And it means that your mentality is kind of caught

between that and I think that's driven a lot of different aspects of my work, particularly for example the interest and allegory. But to turn to the body and your question, I think, like I was talking about before within the collage process, you could call the painting surface a body in itself, which will traditionally, and to talk about refusing to comply with the expectations or traditions of our making, traditionally, that's like one singular canvas. Whilst with my work, instead the canvas is made-up of fragments because I've cut up all of the different drawings and then to make the canvas they're then fused back together and I emphasize this because I quite like sharing my process of making, because I think that brings a way of entering into the work. But none of the bodies that you see in the paintings are one body. They're all made up of disparate parts. So there's a woman in one of the paintings with the bird and she's holding her stomach, and instead of her stomach it's a jug, the mouth of a jug. And the bodies are not necessarily focused on how the body looks. I'm more interested in the body expressing emotion and through the gestures and through those fragments. But to return to that idea of ambiguity, I like keeping that collage element very present and highlighting it by painting the edges of each of the fragments so you can really tell what different part is which and then also allowing it to not neatly disappear almost, I think. I like to keep that ambiguity there, and whilst on the face of the canvas which is all painted, it all becomes almost a naturalised form where the outside reminds that it's not, that it all comes from these disparate parts.

NO: Well, I think it's just been amazing, the opportunity to sit here and chat with friends about the different traumas that are shared that we've experienced, like Shaq so beautifully put as well. And in thinking about the silhouette, which is not something I had realised was a running theme in a lot of our practises, and emptying it out and filling it with newness, in a way. I don't necessarily deal with the silhouette within my practise, but I think I deal with the shell of the body. And it's because of the weight of representation and all the things that have been sort of like dropped on us of who we have to be in this world, that has led my practise in this direction where I've emptied it out of representation. And instead, I'm feeling the body with this sort of undulating mark that flows in and out of representation and goes into abstraction to speak about a state of mind. So the mark is just meant to be there to sort of speak about the fluidity of the mind, the possible traumas we could have experienced both as Black people in this world and also just the general human experience, because I feel like we all deal with different things in our lives. And so that's why this mark has evolved and come into the shell of the body within my practise so people can look at the paintings and have some sort of like resonance with how they've experienced the world and just the shared experience really.

AY: Thank you all. And that kind of leads nicely on because you've already sort of started touching on the sort of processes of making your work and you all have a kind of distinct material language. And I'm kind of curious about how that process

begins, whether you're led by the material or by what you're trying to express and how that happens from the inception. How do you realise your ideas?

NO: So I think I see painting, especially because I'm working with this textile, as kind of collaborative with the material. It took me a while to figure out how to integrate the material into painting because of the stitching and the seams and the panels. It's not something I've done before, so figuring that out and also finding a way to honour the history of this textile by painting on the back of it. So they were dresses in the past, they were dresses worn by the Yoruba people. But for the women, for the women's dresses, there's a headpiece, a crossing sash and wrap skirts. But they weren't stitched into an outfit. They were just panels that were wrapped around. So it then became obvious to me that these panels could come together to form a surface. And so first it was figuring out how to work with that and then also thinking about the ideas and the experiences I was having in real life and how they can sort of seamlessly integrate with the surface without it feeling like some sort of like alien invasion on a heritage textile. And so the textile actually led me to look at my Nigerian experience through a historical lens, which is why I also look at archival photography. So I have a lot to thank the material for in its directing me in this path that I'm going into, but also giving me the freedom to express the things that I'm experiencing as a contemporary artist today.

TAJ: I think the specificity of oil paint and why I use it as the material and why that kind of leads what I do, oil has this really magical ability to shape shift and conjure and kind of create feeling and imagery and space. And I remember when I was really young, I went with my mum to see a Lucian Freud exhibition at, I think, the National Portrait Gallery around the time he passed and I still think about those paintings just for the materiality of them. The colour, horrible, but the paintings really, really resonate, you know, like the way that a whole kind of spirit, form, being, person can be placed in front of you through this material, through the oil paint, through the handling and care and attention of the oil paint, is definitely what's led me to where I am now. I mean, yeah, I don't necessarily look for compositional or other cues from an artist like Freud like that, but I do think about creating a painting that will make you stop as you walk past it and hold you, and I think that's very much to do with the capability of oil paint and I've just been a student of it, I'm still a student of it. I think one of the great things my studies in America offered me during my MFA was a very focused kind of rigorous programme on the materiality of paint and how you can use it, as very practical studio-based programmes. So we'd have these critiques with as many people as there are here, kind of sitting around and just staring at this painting you've made and they would really give it to you and tell you how it was missing in certain areas like this and at the time it did feel a bit excessive, but in the years since, I feel really grateful to have had that attention on being able to make something, and how to manipulate material. And so now I'm feeling that oil paint is a bit like dough or something when you're baking, I'm just getting a bit better as the years go on. I haven't figured it out yet, but the control is increasing and as that

happens you find that you don't have to use as many things. You can kind of just use it straight out the tube, mix it and put it on the canvas now, but that was certainly not how it was for me at the start. It was very tempestuous and hard to contain because I think it has this emotional range to it that can overwhelm you if you're not quite ready for it yet. But if you know what you want from it, it will kind of respond. It's a very to the point material collaborating with you. It's a very kind of back and forth exchange like that. So I think that is the impetus for how I start my work, what I can make the oil do, and where it leads me.

ENOG: Yeah. Just to pick up on that, similarly to Tunji, love the malleability of oil, it's got such an incredible texture and you have to fight it sometimes, but then going with it is amazing. And I think in some ways I was really drawn to the malleability of the paper that I use. And then more recently I've started drawing on marble and that's forcing me to respond to the material, in the sense that I'm looking at the markings on the stone and adjusting the composition to that and that's been quite interesting. Whilst the paper which I was drawn to just always is a material, it's a carrier of ideas, the texture of it, I really, really love how smooth it is. The oil just seeps over it whilst I found the canvas, the grid of the thread, a bit too present for the painting for me, but washi, particularly when I started painting on my Masters I did a massive fresco on a wall of one of the rooms and then had to paint over it, obviously. I was like, I can't continue doing that. That's not very sustainable as an artist practise. So I realised that canvas felt, particularly when I was making on these large scales, a bit too drawing towards the theatrical, which I love, but wasn't what I was looking for. And so paper, I knew of this washi paper, it was able to kind of simulate this idea of the fresco and I really liked this idea of peeling the paper, like almost the fresco, off the wall and making the paper the wall and making us very aware that as we move through the world, we're kind of moving through these kind of very ... We don't see them, but these walls of ideas and they really condition how we move. So the paper really allowed me to do that, and then the fact that I'm able to cut it up and make those cut outs, which allows you to, I think, read the paintings differently, so yeah, the washi has this incredible malleability like oils, whilst the stone is forcing me to respond to the material a bit more, which is interesting.

SW: So for me, like everybody here, oil painting is everything, it's just amazing, it's frustrating, for when I'm making paintings. About a year ago I switched from using gesso on canvas which meant that the painting sat on the acrylic and didn't sink in the way that I wanted it to. Now I've started using a Belgian linen which has got a wide weave. And so this is sinking before you even do anything. It's like sand, and you can then build from there and it undulates and slips through itself in this really beautiful way. And I do a lot of that by distemper paint, lots of pigment, and an oil painting glazing as well in order to sort build to what I want, but more than often I sort of describe oil painting a little bit like having a tool kit in the sense that you've got your tool kit and you've got the things that you know that you can do, and then all of a sudden you put your hand in and you do something unexpected and then that

becomes part of your, like, OK, I know I've got my hammer here now, but you're always reaching back to find if there's new things in which you can figure out how to do and stuff like that. And so, there's just this infinite nature possibility. And also the way in which it goes wrong and goes right. I often start my paintings using this alizarin crimson which is transparent colour. It's not very archival, but what it does mean is that it disappears as you're going through the painting process and I find more often than not you're building slowly, you're building fast, you're building slow, you're reaching for things that you know that you can do, but then there's this plethora of things that you know that you can't. You don't even know what those are, and it's just a constant process of figuring that out. And more often than not, it's looking to people that are better than you, different to you. Completely the opposite track to you. I look at a lot of Rothko in order to try and solidify my work, because I know Tunji said something quite interesting about that hold. Like for me what I want my work to be is like portals in which you stop, you take note, you maybe go round again then you come back and then you want to fall in. And I think that often comes from a surface and the way in which we tackle the surface like a body and if you take it in that instance it's infinite, and it's malleable, and it doesn't matter if you mash it a little bit, but then bring it back, because there's always a reward, even in failure, through painting. I think that's something that's very unique to oil and something has been saving me for a long, long time.

JDM: Thank you. I love the idea, Tunji, that you mentioned, and I think reflected in everything everyone said. I'm very lucky coming last all the time because I can just rip off your ideas. But this idea that we're constantly students of the materials that we use guiding us through, and also what we're experiencing each day and the histories that we're working from. So as you were speaking, I was thinking about panel painting with regards to your work, Tunji, and then I was thinking about like, do you put additives in your paint? They've got a quality of sort of panel painting. And then I was thinking about panel paintings that I love from our national collections. So constantly, we're going back and forth through a material history and art history. This discourse that we're having with everything that inspires us on a daily basis, and also this idea of sort of aspiration. So with my own work, I'm aspiring all the time, using the materials to sort of note take how I might do things differently next time and also working with the restraints that we all have to deal with in our careers, I guess. Whereby, you know, I want a massive studio and I want it now, and, you know, I can use those materials that will inevitably be used in a different way, and then being on a panel like this and hearing about the washi papers and thinking, "oh my gosh, I had no idea" and being inspired by one another. So the materials act differently each time you return to the studio if you're feeling free enough to let them guide one. Because also there's restraints that I also put, like I'm trying to make it do something that I have already accomplished and trying to recreate it again, but they behave in their own way as well and it's that sort of surrendering to the materials, the restraint. You know, there's no way that I, at the moment, that I could work on the floor. And then I'm thinking about Frank Bowling, I understand that he works on the floor, and then

you'll see those staples or whatever embedded in the canvas and you're, like, I want that mistake to happen but it can't happen immediately. There are all sorts of factors that are coming into play alongside the materials, I think, you know, where you are in the world, like the humidity. So if I was in Nigeria then I would perhaps be able to create a lot faster with watercolour because it might, the humidity might, I don't know, I haven't been to Nigeria, I'd like to. It would dry quicker? And if I had a big space, I could work on simultaneously, you know? All of those considerations coming into play. But it is again, it's such a privilege, isn't it, to be able ... At the moment I'm working with really beautiful Arches on the roll, this really heavy expensive roll of watercolour paper, so it feels like I'm luxuriating and I'm using watercolour paints by the tube like Schmincke. They're expensive and I'm now at the point where I can afford those and it makes financial sense to do that because I want them to be preserved. I want to be using materials that keep and can be preserved.

AY: Thank you all. I think it's always such a peek behind the curtain for us all to be able to hear about the actual artistic process and in relation to that, Tunji, I wanted to ask you about the shift from the process of making paintings to curating a show and what that experience was like for you and the experience that you were setting out to achieve. Because I'm also thinking about what Elena was saying about moving through space being surrounded by images and the impact that they had on us. And I felt that very strongly when I was moving through the gallery yesterday and we had a bit of a chat about it, Shaq, as well.

TAJ: Yeah, I think I've noticed a few gaps that can be filled, one that I actually don't think I could do because I'm not very patient and I can't write. I can paint, but I can't write. But I think that there should also be art criticism, art writing, and art history that really is speaking to what we've all been speaking to here as well about these exhibitions that are happening concurrently, about the way that we're all able to learn from each other now, collaborate more easily and just frankly, how over the past decade there have been some really sensational exhibitions. Ekow Eshun curated that show in London, *Soul of a Nation* show that came a few years before that. There are a lot of amazing things happening and I get worried that they might get lost and not kind of unified in the way that they ought to in terms of the broader historical progression of things that are happening in any given moment. So that's one thing I wish I could do too. But the second would be to do more shows like this where I'm seeing, you know, everyone on this panel is doing a lot, everyone has a lot of things going on, exhibitions or otherwise. And so sometimes we get put in these instances where we're singularly just not isolated, but it's kind of expected to just stand alone on certain pedestals or platforms and I think there can and should always be more room for instances like this that are not as like financially driven necessarily, although of course we all need that. It's nice to sometimes counterweight that with an exhibition that doesn't quite have that charge or intensity, a conversation that's more about just everything we've been saying so far today. And so that pivot came just because, you know, you're sitting at home and you're like, well, someone should do

this. And then someone's like, yeah, *you* should do it. So it's like, OK, I'll try it. But stepping into a space that I think there's room to do more in, the show's given me more ideas. There are obviously artists we were speaking about the other day, certain people who couldn't be in the show because they have other stuff going on, so this is kind of like a very expansive concept that is by no means confined to just these gallery walls. Yeah, let's see what happens.

AURELLA: I think that's a good place to lead on to, I think, probably my final question before we open it up to everyone else, and that's about futurity and Nengi, you kind of touched on it a little bit earlier. What does the future of diasporic imagination look like in your own work, but also collectively as a generation of artists?

NO: Well, I think in some of the paintings that I make, I'm looking at the body and it's very close and the body is very large on the surface. But with paintings like the one I put in the show here, the body sort of shrinks and is smaller and is almost on an equal scale with the environment, because I feel sometimes as human beings, we're very large and we're very loud and we stomp around and break things and bomb things and destroy things. And I guess within the paintings where I'm thinking a lot more about the natural world, I'm thinking about a kind of new world building where we are at one with nature and we're moving quietly through a landscape without stepping on things and without being destructive. And I guess that's the world that I'm building with my landscape paintings.

TAJ: Yeah, I'll pick up on that quickly and say that the future that I envision after hearing you describe that so beautifully is a space where all that we're doing and hoping to do within our personal individual practises that comes to fruition in these gallery spaces also is able to very comfortably and competently sort of eke out into the environments around us, to your point. So public artwork like stuff that is in schools or in other places. Joy, who is in the audience, is doing a mural for a hospital in London, like that kind of thing. So these concepts don't stay so confined necessarily but are broadly able to be understood like everywhere in our environment. Because of course, yeah, the environment and the landscape is something that we all think about too and care about too, and it's crucial. So I think hopefully, yeah, more public artworks, more more things like that. More direct engagement with the outside as well. Alvaro, who's not here, has done some of that. Tschabalala has also done some public sculptures here in the UK engaging with the broader culture in that way. I would like to see that be something that is perhaps not so, I don't want to say hard to attain or access, but something that feels a bit more of a natural space for us to develop into. I feel like when you're studying in a school or you're in these kinds of programmes that can and should be something that is taught for you to, or kind of incentivize for you to, aspire to as a space for you to occupy potentially as well, for your work. It shouldn't just be that your work should only be in the studio or this place or that place.

ENOG: I would just like to talk about where I view the imagination going. I think seeing so many incredible exhibitions like the Tate Britain Nigerian Modernism, which I've yet to see but I can't wait to see, and the Kerry James Marshall and all of these shows, as well as the revisions of history, I'm really intrigued to see how this kind of making history messier in the sense of it not being one clear-cut stable narrative of what things were like and spreading the agency out a little bit as who had power and when, is going to be really interesting to see how that influences the imagination, our references are going to be there where they weren't there before, I think, as they weren't necessarily so easy to find for us as artists. And then as things become more radical and scary at the moment and racism's kind of getting all the worse, I think it'll be interesting to see how that plays in with the history that seems to be making that world vision so much more complex. And then with my own work I'm trying to, I think, create more ways for people to enter into the work, so I've been trying to split the allegory over disparate elements in the work, and I'm started doing that for the work in this show, and I'm really interested to see how that plays out and seeing people engage with the work. So if I'm watching you it's because I'm really interested to see how you're looking at it. So yeah, I just want to widen out the way of reading to create, I guess, that mentality of inbetweenness, so that more people can inhabit it, because I think it is a real space for creativity and isn't a mentality to be settled or kind of pinned down in any way. It's to be explored really.

JDM: In terms of future, I remembered when you mentioned about *Things Fall Apart*, about the Roots album, and I think I'm hoping that there will be a sort of resurgence of culture workers on a wide scale, so we broaden it out from visual artists to all culture workers, to make change within our sector, which then would have an impact structurally on what histories are told and taught. And that would, I hope, then impact writing on Black British histories and, just to say, if you have aspirations to write I would love to read it and work with you on that if that ever came about. So yeah, I was thinking about the sort of impetus for the show as well. This idea of collectivising and movement and world building like you were saying. And thinking about what changes also could be made in terms of collapsing this idea of individualism within our sector. I'm sat with particularly gifted, talented, amazing artists. And yet together we're even stronger. To use a phrase, I think, of the late Jo Cox, you know? So this idea of collectivising to make our voices louder, or our work louder, particularly emphasising Black British culture and what that means distinct from African American histories, which we all draw from because it's so dominant, and they've got it together. They know where they are in terms of their histories, whereas I think, Tunji and I were speaking about, you know, we're not quite clear as a sort of nation around what race or racism is, how it manifests, the role of Imperialism and colonialism, how that affects us today and who was involved and it's all obfuscated it feels to me still, so it makes it difficult in terms of collectivising because we haven't really agreed what that history is. So that would lead into also having conversations around class and how that impacts how we make, who makes. I'm teaching and I'm noticing that there aren't many, if at all in the year groups that I teach, working class

art students because they can't afford it. It's a sort of rarefied subject now, Art History or Fine Arts and it's sort of devalued in popular rhetoric because they know it's so powerful, actually, as well. So as long as it is produced by a certain class of people, we're all going to lose out, including the people that can afford to practise, you know. We were speaking also about Simone Lee who brought together a collective that I'm sure many of you know was called Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter, so it would be great to think that we are sort of joining forces to make the structural changes that we need to see. There's a sort of poignancy in terms of, you know, Manchester was the host of the Fifth Pan-African Congress in 1945, which led to different African countries gaining their independence. So, you know, I'm not saying that we're going to make those kind of changes ... You might though, I have faith in you, Tunji, that we can make those huge ripple effects, but I think it's about a concerted effort, isn't it, to keep pressing for those structural changes. And it is interesting, sorry, also just to go back to the Kerry James Marshall *This Cultural Life* which I heard and I was also disappointed that he didn't speak to that. And then I was thinking about how our sector works. You know, he garners the most amount of money for a living Black artist, and then I was thinking about which artists do speak out politically. I mean, it is true, you know, you use your art as the vehicle. But also when millions of pounds are at stake, I wonder how that also drives to kind of silence you in terms of what you say. You're also maybe then a kind of diplomat so that you can keep playing that game. So it's going to also take a lot of us saying things that are unpalatable.

SW: My turn! It's amazing what you guys have all said. I think the idea about diplomacy especially, is quite interesting, in a future. It's something that is very easy to say, that I'm not interested in it, but I think what I want more than anything else is further access, more access for working class Black kids to be in institutions that I've gone through. It was a privilege to be in some of the spaces that I've been in and to see more of that and to see more, not just more voices, of course you want more voices, but like, I think that to say more voices is like more is more is more is more. And that's not the point. I think to be very specific in the way in which we want to speak and be and have the freedom of being oneself is so important. Honestly, a lot of the time while listening to you guys all talk, I was thinking about my time at Slade, I think it's very important. We've got Jade working as a tutor and then me and Nengi, we were both at Slade at the same time. I think about some of the conversations I was having during that time and the support that I had in order to have access to sort of like Black tutorials from Jade, from Alvaro, from Michael Armitage, from Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, from a plethora of amazing, amazing artists. And I think that should be more readily available, so that we can come together to have a bit more of a set identity. It is funny because it mirrors things like in music, for example, like grime is dead, grime is dead, grim is dead, grime's not dead, but like, well, how do we mobilise this thing, I can almost touch it. And I think it's the same with Black British art in the sense that we exist and it's here and we can touch it. But do we need more of us? Do we need more of us to be at the forefront? Is it on us to not be interested

in diplomacy when the money is right there, because money buys silence? I don't know. I don't know whether I'm leading, but I'll follow you guys wherever you guys are going. But then in terms of my own work, I think I'd like more freedom, more ability to fail. I think the ability to fail is so important as an artist. And as I said before, earlier in this talk, I think that because your work is taken in such a political way that when it fails and it doesn't do something like failing Black people as a whole. It's absolutely terrifying, it's something that other counterparts don't necessarily have to carry with them. I think that through failure we'll be able to speak more openly and be able to learn more and in turn be able to make work which is more true and take up more space. I'm really proud. I think that's what a lot of what this show does and I'm very proud to be a small part of that. So thank you.

TAJ: Just quickly to add to that, I'm glad you brought up music, and Jade mentioned music too. For some reason I think the artist Jim Legxacy titling his debut album Black British Music ...

SW: I'm sorry, that album is absolutely wild. Absolutely wild.

TAJ: Aside from how good it is, because it is really good, just the title and the labelling, it's so significant. And enough can't be said about how someone in his position who is quite young too ... It's not like there haven't been Black British musicians kind of doing things over the decades, but the label is so important. To Jade's point about us being able to kind of collectively organise and understand and believe the same thing and agree on the same thing, on what is and what isn't. I just think in, you know, my only 33 years on this planet that is like a really significant thing for me to see as the Black Brit, it seems innocuous, but I just think that's so significant. I think everything that comes after a moment like that is in alignment. I think something like that that might seem, yeah, just like another grime album or something, but that's going to have a big impact. And I think about that a lot. I think about that in relation to everything that we're speaking about, too. Yeah. Music's equally as important.

AY: Should we have some questions from the audience, if there are any?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Just want to say thank you to all of you. It's been such a treat and a privilege to listen to all of you and to hear your insights and your thinking. Huge congratulations to Tunji, it's a really inspiring exhibition and I think it's a landmark exhibition and my question is, will this be the first curated show, is this part one? Will there be future exhibitions continuing this investigation?

TAJ: Thank you very much. Yes, there will definitely be sequels. I have to come up with some more titles and then I might take Jade up on that offer for some kind of collaborative writing project further down the line. Maybe when we have a string of shows put together, but yeah, I would love to do more. I think this has been so fruitful and I feel really energised and encouraged and like frankly, just like a bit relieved from it all, you know. This is really what we want as artists, to just like have each

other in this way. So yeah, grateful for everyone for being so generous with their work, incredible work in this show. Yeah. Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you as well for everything. I think it's been a fantastic panel discussion. I guess my question, it's not so much a question, it might be a comment as well, is I hear a lot from the discourse about, you know, being Black, diaspora and the political aspect of art heritage, and I just wonder whether you have that, I guess, outlet to just be? You mentioned it, I think, quite a lot, Shaq, just that freedom to be and I just wanted to know whether as artists you really have that freedom or whether you have that pressure a lot of the time to really express yourself in a certain way politically or do you just have that freedom to be, really?

NO: That's a really good question. And I'll just use my practise, because it's what I know. But originally when I was thinking about the body and sort of putting trauma through paints in the sort of capsule of the shell of the body, that extended to thinking about a collective experience, and I was looking at archival images to sort of document collective grief as a response to the Nigerian situation, socio-political situation. And I realised that while I was making those paintings, I was getting more and more depressed and it was just the heaviest experience. I would be painting, sometimes crying. It was very dramatic and so unnecessary. And that's when I realised I needed to look into what actually made me happy as an artist and what made me feel rest. And that's when I started looking into my horticultural experience and gardening and landscapes, and those were things that I never felt the liberty to bring into painting because I felt maybe it's not serious enough to paint flowers and to paint plants and things like this. Then I did a residency in Paris, or in France, and I got to see the Impressionists, and I saw lots of men painting flowers and painting landscapes, and that was their their engagement for the rest of their lives. And I was thinking, OK, I know flowers and plants. Why don't I just have that liberty to do that and bring that into my practise? Which is why the painting in the show is a seascape. It's just people resting in nature. There is almost... Yes, there is a looming understanding of where those bodies came from, which is archival photography from Nigeria, but I've removed them from a state of distress and placed them in this restful landscape. So yes, we intentionally, I think, within our practises make space for rest and for just enjoyment.

SW: Sorry, I was just gonna add to that. I think another amazing example that just popped into my mind was there was amazing show earlier this year at White Cube of Theaster Gates' exhibition and you go into the space and there's this translation of civil rights posters and stuff like that that's in Japanese because they were so interested in what was going on in America at that time. And then you walked through to the back of Bermondsey, and you're confronted with these sake casks that have been made. And it was absolutely beautiful. And I think the relationship between both Blackness, but then this transatlantic interest and the interest in just like crafting itself within his practise and across what that exhibition was doing, I think it's a really good signifier of the fact that it was letting be and having it be just him,

but also the importance of what he was trying to say through the works as well and both things being true at the same time. And another person like Arthur Jafa, I went and saw a talk of his with Mark Leckey, the coolest brother, grey hair, earring, and the way that he spoke was unbothered but very engaged. If you don't listen, you'll miss what he's saying. And I think that those are the artists, as well as the artists on this table, that I look to as an example of what it means to be but also to take note and stand up and be counted in that sense.

JDM: Thank you. So, I think about environmental factors, so if you feel a sense of belonging you can be, potentially, if you've got the things that you need around you. So I I'm also thinking that about that in Ireland, perhaps, they've just brought in a sort of stipend or like a universal basic income for artists. So if you've got that, then you've got the luxury to be. I think it's those environmental factors ... And also I'm from the north of England east coast where there's sort of a denial again about how whiteness operates. So if you haven't got a community in which you can sort of operate safely then there's a tension. Thank you so much for the question, I think that's an aspiration, we all just want to be and belong and get on with what we do best.

ENOG: Could I just add, I was just thinking about something Tunji said about we can paint but then putting it into words feels really hard. And I think when you're in the studio, everything isn't concrete, it has a shifting form. And also you're so in your own world and then suddenly, once you've made the work and you have to put it into these very concrete stiff words, and then suddenly the comment you've made suddenly feels really sharply political in a way that you had not thought about. It seems unbelievable, but I've created work and then thought, "Oh God, people are going to read it in this way" and I think suddenly putting the the work out in the world is when you feel, I feel personally, the most scared, I think. But also the work is about that, it's about sharing what you've made and allowing people to have a different reading of it, because also you realise you can't assume what people are going to think.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you. Hi, everyone. First of all, thank you so much for this wonderful conversation as well as the works in the exhibition. It's just wonderful to receive all of this richness. My question is kind of connected to the conversation we're just having. I was wondering what your own approach might be to what I construct as a double-edged sword and maybe you might not even think of it as a double-edged sword, which I'd be interested in hearing as well. On one hand, the expectation to identify with these conventional identity markers and talking about race for instance as a unifying concern, and on the other hand how it kind of doesn't then allow breathing room for all of the wonderful ways that your practises are different, and that you're all concerned with on a detailed level, very specific different things, like the work even looks different on a detailed formal level and in terms of what approaches and motifs it's leveraging as well. I'm an artist myself, Jade knows, and I grew up, I was born and raised, and this is not public facing information, in a

country and a culture where I'm from a dominant ethnic group. And so when I finally moved to the West as an adult, I found it really distasteful and repulsive to have to be identified through how people think I should be identifying, because I think much like how whiteness doesn't have to think about its whiteness, that's how, somewhat, was a similar experience where somebody from a dominant ethnic group, global majority, you don't have to think about it at all. And then coming to the UK or the US you're suddenly expected to identify in certain ways and then your work is primarily read through a certain lens, and then that's used as a unifying thread as well, and we know the systems we are operating in and so on one hand, it allows for visibility and community and collective action, but on the other hand, it's also, I feel like it doesn't allow for artists and their artworks to take centre stage as other than that. So I don't know if that's very clear, but yeah, I was wondering what are, you know, on one hand, yes, we want it to be a collective momentum, but on the other hand, I personally found it, coming from the background, deeply unsettling being seen in the West. Yeah. Thank you.

TAJ: Thank you for that question. I hope we'll have time for everyone to speak as that's a very real question and I think that really is, aside from just being an artist, what we deal with just as people, and I think there's such a broad philosophical psychoanalytical conversation to be had there too, where I do think that the friction you're describing through the double edged sword is ... It's certainly not necessary, but it's very productive and I think that we're all able to pass through these experiences and thoughts, and we're very privileged to be able to make art as our output, right? And I think it's the same with athletes and how they use just performance and sport, whether it's the Olympics or anything, to kind of just like exist through all that you're describing. And so I think what's really important, I guess, is that we're connected to community like we're describing, that we're connected to these educational systems that we're learning from and then giving back to an equal measure, that we're documenting what we're doing, that we're accounting for it, archiving it, making sure that we, as we all sit here are still this way in 10, 20, 30, 40... Like just surviving is itself such a significant thing to what you're saying, because otherwise you can certainly get consumed and crushed under the weight of it too. But I don't necessarily know that we will find a clear cut, at least as far as I'm concerned, answer for that. I guess you just always want to be able to feel like you have the room space and community to address it and speak about it and work through it and not suppress it and repress it, right? It's something that you kind of have to bear and expose and be very open and naked about. I'll let everyone else say something but that's a really interesting question. It's got me thinking about a lot of things.

AY: I think you're probably more directing it at the artists, but I think I also have a perspective on this as a writer and art historian because I think a lot of what you're saying is about how the work is received, how it's kind of interpreted through the lens of experts, that bridge between often the artists and the artwork and the general

public and how that's presented, and I kind of want to posit that it's not mutually exclusive between focusing on the variation, the details of the work, the material practises, the work itself and the experiences of being a marginalised group within a particular society, because that is a real thing. So to kind of try to sidestep that would be disingenuous, I think. But I think, and this is something that you sort of touched on earlier, Tunji, about writing, and about critics, and I think it's really important that we, as well as within this ecosystem and community that we're trying to create and cultivate, that it's not just about the artists making the work, but also everybody else that is involved in that and ensuring that we have educators, writers, critics, curators who have both the cultural competence but also the kind of art historical understanding to be able to bring all of those things together and actually, you know, do justice to the work and to the artists. And that's something that can be built on for subsequent generations.

SW: I was just going to expand on what you said a little bit. I think what you said was amazing. It's interesting described it as balancing on a knife edge because I feel like that a lot too. I think the thing that's helped me is knowing there's the art world, and then there's the artwork. And I think the studio is your safe place. It's your haven. It's where the work belongs and it's where work exists and and it takes on a new life once it leaves the studio. And I think we're really fortunate that you meet like-minded people, people from similar backgrounds, sometimes not even from similar backgrounds, that you'll end up in a situation where your work is advocated for you. And I've been really fortunate to have my work advocated for me by people that add so much context to the work and help support, because honestly, you might have seen, a lot of what goes on in my head I find it really hard to express and so it comes out a little bit muddled sometimes, but this is all to say that it's not your responsibility to have other people catch up to where you are. The work is there and I think part of it's maybe giving people more credit. I find that some people, some of my friends, for example, they come into a space, even just an art space, and it's so confronting that they even worry about what to say, let alone everything that else that goes in it. And the other part I find is the work always belongs to you no matter where it goes, it comes down to why you're making art. It's not saying that it doesn't matter, it very much does matter, cause it's a career, we want to be doing this for many, many, many years. But I feel as if I concern myself with the thoughts of others in that kind of way, it would just be too heavy of a weight to carry and it's never one that belonged to me and was ever mine. So I think the easiest thing is to let it go. But then also not be ignorant when stepping out into that world. So I'm not saying to ignore, but rather know when to switch on and off in order to make sure you can come to the studio for yourself, but also make sure that when you're moving through spaces that when people turn and sort of say, oh, it's this, that and the other, and you're sort of like well, no, but you want the right person to be talking about my work anyway. So we need to keep it moving to the people that can and do, and so that's what's helped me keep going.

NO: Yeah, I was just going to add to that very great question and well, I guess from my perspective, I guess moving from England where, you know, in a way sometimes we're considered a minority, but now my practise is kind of based in Nigeria and I have an understanding that I belong to a global majority. And just thinking about my practise through that lens is perhaps what gave me the liberty to start thinking about botanicals and flowers and landscape and things like this. But I think within all our practises you can see a sort of multi-layered nature to what we do. We're thinking about memory, history, textiles and oil paint and what it feels like to work with oils. And yes, sometimes we have to have those conversations about race because we've all said it's not something we should sidestep. We must address that. But we hope as well when you see the work, you see all of these histories and all of these conversations and all of these multiple topics that we are we are latching onto to feed the work.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hello, everyone. So I have a very Nigerian question. I like something Tunji said at the beginning. Something about not being aware of kind of significant artists like Kerry James Marshall and people like that, and it's something that kind of resonates with myself, because I grew up in Nigeria and I moved here a couple of years ago. It was the first time I started engaging with Nigerian artists and people of Nigerian extract who were doing work that was very, very Nigerian. Growing up in Nigeria, a lot of my thinking about art was a lot of Nigerian artists were trying to be like Western and be very European. It's been really exciting and engaging with people like you are doing work that talks to a Nigerian experience. My question is more about contribution and how it's very obvious your work recognises Nigerian history and culture and memory and things like that. But from my experience growing up in Nigeria, there's not lot of widespread public confrontation of culture. Culture is something that is just there. No one talks about it, it's just there. It's rich and it's very significant, but it's just there. So it feels kind of stuck. And as a young person growing up in Nigeria, you can feel kind of oppressed by it. Then when you go outside of Nigeria there's a kind of celebration of it, using it to tell new and important stories and new imaginations of Nigeria that you might not really see back home in Nigeria. So I'd like to hear your thoughts about how your work might contribute to a new kind of confrontation of culture and those ideas they're pulling from, like pushing them forward back home in Nigeria.

TAJ: Well, funny you should ask, I just made a mural in Nigeria two weeks ago to address exactly what you're describing, I was in Benin City and I spent some time getting to know the environment and I went to the University of Benin campus, saw everything there, and then I kind of responded to the environment whilst also bringing in some of my own personal work stylizations and I made a mural in the museum that they're building there, MOWAA. And I think there was something there for me that felt really exciting and encouraging and reassuring, and I felt mostly because of the audience and the way they were describing ... people who have maybe seen my work a lot, either through their phones or online or something, but

for it to be at such a large scale and for it to be permanent and for it to be there directly in conversation with the environment I think is significant, so I'm working on it. Yeah, it's in progress. It's happening. I intend to bring more of my work to spaces like that.

NO: So yes, that's a very, very good point. And like Tunji said, putting art in public spaces is one way we can do that. I got invited to do a mural by hospital rooms similar to what Joy is doing right now, and it sort of inspired me. So when I went back to Nigeria, I started my own foundation and it's called The Art of Healing. And we commission young artists and established artists and international artists to install work in psychiatric wards in Nigeria. So at the moment we've actually installed seven murals, not just me, other artists as well have been brought in on the project, seven murals in LUTH, Lagos University Teaching Hospital, and we're moving to another campus now and then we're also hoping to build a psychiatric ward in the future, so I think the things we're thinking about within our practises are spilling out into the real world and it's starting for us at home in Nigeria.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: First of all I would like to say I'm grateful you know to be here. His question was sort of related to what I was gonna ask and you've all answered that already. I was going to ask about how making art like this can actually affect society? My mind is moving through so many things, but I'm thinking I'm Nigerian even though sometimes I don't like to identify as that in that sense. Not in a negative way! I was raised in Warri by my grandma, my grandma is Itsekiri. And most of the time I identify as Itsekiri. And my dad is from Ukwuani. And my mum is Yoruba. So it's more like a mix of so many things. It's not racial but it's tribal and in Nigeria, we have our own sets of these constructs and the problems that come with it. So it's always like what do I identify as when I'm home in Nigeria, and you know being here right now, I'm Black basically. I think the the main question I was gonna ask is, is there reality where we don't talk about these things? I mean is there a reality where the Middle Passage didn't happen, what sort of works would we be creating? Would you be creating, rather? What sort of reality would this be like? Is there one? What would it look like?

TAJ: Are you an artist? Do you make? Do you write? What do you do?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I write. I make sound, photography.

TAJ: OK. I mean, so you tell us, right? You show us, right? That's that's the magic of what we're able to do because it's an incredible question. I think that there's certainly space for you to approach that, for you to enter into that through your desired medium, through whatever choice and write some stories about it. I'd love to read them because, I don't think I can answer that right now for you! So. But I think you're definitely in a position to address that, please step into that, is what I would say.

AY: I think there are examples of artists who are making works which are taking into consideration the possibilities of alternate realities and sort of multiple realities

happening at the same time, and not restraining ourselves to constructs of time and space as we are sort of restricted to. I'm thinking about, they're often cited, Drexciya, who have this whole kind of reality that they have visualised in sound art which imagines the captured enslaved Africans who either jumped or were thrown off the slave ships during the Middle Passage, and this kind of alternate society that they created submerged beneath the ocean and there have been many subsequent artists who've been inspired by that because it was kind of sound works but there are visual artists who are making works based on that. So, you know, that's just one example. I think when you are thinking about going beyond what is the narrative that is constantly repeated and reinscribed through very linear history, when you step outside of that, you have such an infinite realm of possibility. And, as Tungi said, you can take that in any direction, but also seek out artists who are doing that already.

ENOG: I think I just wanted to add that I think it's a really interesting question. And as as everyone was talking, I was just thinking about there's so much knowledge about Western art history, and I think I can far more quickly imagine what Western art history would be without the influence of Africa and would be so different and I think it's such a fascinating question to turn that and see what African art history would have been without the Western influence. But I think just that comparison shows that there's so much more work to be done to understand African visual art history, I think.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Could I ask what is the meaning to have your show here in HOME, Manchester? You mentioned about the African Congress. That is also true. Also Manchester, this town where the slave trade was active. That's why President Lincoln communicated with that. Also Suffragettes and also a peace town. And also you might have met Engels standing in front of this building welcoming you. So is there any kind of meaning, this being in Manchester?

TAJ: Yeah, great question and a great one for us to finish on because that brings us right back to the start of, you know, when the show was proposed to me by Clarissa and what I was thinking about, and how it certainly felt a bit overwhelming for me to just address on my own through my singular practise, right? So I think the specificity of Manchester has, and even the people who I've met locally over this past week I've been here, and prior, has really validated my decision to bring so many people with me and for us to share this kind of platform so that it's not suggested that what we're speaking about is narrow or simplistic or reductive, but kind of more infinite in nature because of exactly to your point, all of the different kind of aspects of the city, its culture and its history that in its own specific ways, has also affected our practises from a distance, right, as it's affected just the whole world. So I think, what has it meant in the specificity of Manchester? I think it's encouraged me to connect and engage more broadly, certainly, rather than trying to address it in the way that sometimes we're positioned to do as artists where it's like, OK, I am the one. This is a shared space and I think this city also has an expansive history of communal gathering. Obviously, the Pan African Congress and things like this, and as I've been

learning about that, yeah, there's there's an extensive history of that up here. So it's an honour and a privilege to be able to contribute to that in, in our way, whatever way we can. Yeah, it was an invitation and we've come here to see what it's all about.

CLARISSA: Thank you so much. I gushed in my speech last night at the launch, so I'm not going to do that again, but, Tunji, it's been a huge pleasure working with you on this exhibition and with all of you. Thank you Shaquéelle, Elena, Aurella, Tunji, Nengi and Jade for this morning, for your incredible insights. Thank you all for coming. Please do tell your friends about the exhibition. Thank you.