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John Madu's "A Loop in Time" Gives Context to Contemporary at Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery

BY THE EDITORS OF ARTNEWS

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JOHN MADU/ZIDOUN-BOSSUYT GALLERY

Playing on such themes as Greek mythology, racist American poster art, and Star Wars, the Nigerian artist's compelling, humorous new solo show turns negative cultural symbols on their head

Multidisciplinary artist John Madu is an exciting voice that exemplifies the vibrancy and cultural plurality of his hometown, the burgeoning international art hub of Lagos, Nigeria. His practice examines the complexity of individual identity and represents

moments in history or personal experience through portraits and figurative characters. The artist brings his subjects, who are often striking in complexion and stature, into and out of focus by framing or obscuring their bodies with splashes of bright color. Madu works across a variety of mediums, including collage, ink, and mixed media, but gravitates toward acrylic and oil paints; he's also particularly interested in the textural effects achieved by incorporating different materials, such as burlap and other fabrics, into his paintings.

"A Loop in Time," Madu's latest exhibition and his first solo show at **Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery** (<http://www.zidoun-bossuyt.com/>) in Luxembourg, crystallizes many salient elements of his visual language and distills some of his recurring thematic ideas to their most elemental level. According to the artist, the show centers on "reinterpreting narratives in history to fit into contemporary discourse concerning social and political debates." This is evidenced by especially transparent references that not only heighten the works' allegorical underpinnings but also make this one of the artist's most accessible collections to date.

Self-taught from a young age, Madu found early inspiration in reading about art history and biographies, and funneled his youthful imagination into creating comic strips and clay sculptures. He began painting professionally two years after completing a bachelor's degree in policy and strategic studies, and credits his technical education for honing a sense of conceptual rigor that forms the core of his artistic process. Despite Madu's exhaustive and iterative approach to developing his ideas, his mature inspirations are as far-ranging and evocative as his childhood muses, drawing upon aesthetic influences from functional art and fashion, as well as sampling imagery from art history, African history, and popular culture.





Judgement of Paris (we are the gifts), 2021
 Acrylic on canvas
 173 x 182 cm (68.11 x 71.65 inches)
 JOHN MADU/ZIDOUN-BOSSUYT GALLERY

Madu's art, which is rich in heady symbolism and allegory, is also consistently electrified by a sense of humor bolstered by a familiar iconography that underscores its social and political tenor. His work has appeared in solo and group exhibitions domestically in Nigeria and at such prestigious international venues as Copeland and Hoxton Arches galleries in London; One Art Space Gallery in New York; and at the Tokyo and Shanghai arts fairs. Additionally, his facility in the pop-culture vernacular has made him a choice collaborator for international brands such as Diesel and Bombay Sapphire. The paintings in this show lean especially heavily on Madu's signature palette. Murky backgrounds soften the edges around the artist's characteristically dark-skinned figures, sharpening the contrast between the subjects and their bright-hued vestments. Such is the case in *Judgement of Paris (we are the gifts)*, 2021, which depicts three women in colorful clothing standing against a deep, leafy green backdrop parted by a crag of cerulean sky. In a nod to Peter Paul Rubens' representations of the Greek myth of the golden apple, Madu illustrates competing presentations of feminine beauty, shown in the women's contrasting modes of dress. Subverting the expectation of the myth, however, the figures are visually unified through proximity and the vivid colors shared in their garments, suggesting mutual empowerment rather than opposition.



JOHN MADU/ZIDOUN-BOSSUYT GALLERY

Both color and formal references play a similar role in *Maleek: Of skin and stereotypes II*, 2021. The painting's subject, wide-mouthed with gnarled fingers, adopts the same pose as the titular character in Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*; but Madu's reinterpretation swaps the unfortunate progeny of the source material with a slice of watermelon. Here again, the background is so dark as to subsume the shirtless figure, placing visual attention on the fluorescent reds and greens of both the fruit and the subject's clothes. The piece lampoons 19th-century American posters defaming emancipated Black Americans by repossessing their racist iconography in a bid to invert negative cultural symbols—not by obscuring them, but by singling them out.



Not this time invader II, 2021
Acrylic on canvas
180 x 150 cm (70.87 x 59.06 inches)

JOHN MADU/ZIDOUN-BOSSUYT GALLERY

Though the works in this exhibition adhere primarily to the acrylic medium, Madu's penchant for materiality remains evident in his meticulous rendering of two-dimensional fabrics. He takes particular care in recreating textures and patterns in clothing—illuminating their implications of gender, social class, and origin, thereby accentuating the juxtaposition between those fabrics' cultural connotations and the figures they adorn.

Nowhere is this more effective than in *Not this time invader VII*, 2021, which depicts two figures locked in battle. Against a sylvan backdrop not dissimilar to that of *Judgement of Paris*, the painting's lightsaber-wielding protagonist looms, post-coup de grâce, over the eyeless figure of a falling colonial soldier, a recurring character in Madu's work. Sporting a flattop haircut and thigh-high stockings apparently emblazoned with the *Star Wars* logo, the hero is athletic and triumphant, asserting a masculine dominance—but their pink fingernails, trim blouse, and Ankara-fabric skirt are decidedly feminine.

The victor's pose and physical androgyny suggest the triumph of a new individual and al identity that embodies gender equity and multiculturalism over that of yet er faceless colonial oppressor. Yet in the bottom left corner of the painting, a

mahogany-hued figurine, ostensibly resembling a piece of African folkloric art, appears just within reach of the fallen soldier. Has the artifact been released from the antagonist's grasp, bidding it return to the possession of the protagonist? Or is it fated to tumble out of frame with the redcoat, suggesting that the loss of one's culture is the cost of reclaiming power?



JOHN MADU/ZIDOUN-BOSSUYT GALLERY

A body of work so replete with contemporary references might time-stamp a less-skilled artist than Madu; instead, the open-endedness of questions such as these situates his work in a continuum—one that seeks to engage recursively with personal, cultural, and art-centric histories while trying to define a place within it. "A Loop in Time" signifies a clear articulation of Madu's thesis, marked by an aesthetic precision and leanness that allow his distinct point of view and resonant universal messages to shine through unencumbered.

John Madu is exclusively represented by Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery.

"A Loop in Time (https://vr.seemore.art/zidoun-bossuyt/a_loop_in_time)" runs through December 24, 2021, at Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery (<http://www.zidoun-bossuyt.com/>) in Luxembourg.

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