

ARTAFRICA

INTERVIEW

Samuel Olayombo: Before the Scroll — Memory, Childhood, and the Politics of Touch

In 'Canter Days: When Gallop Was the Scroll', the Nigerian artist reimagines the rider not as a symbol of conquest, but as a child sovereign — a bearer of memory, tenderness, and return.

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Samuel Olayombo, *On the Road To Jamestown*, 2025. Acrylic on Canvas, 144 x 196cm. Courtesy of the artist and Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery.

'Gallop Was the Scroll' marks Nigerian artist Samuel Olayombo's third solo

exhibition with the gallery. The presentation transforms the familiar image of the rider — long tied to conquest and control—into an emblem of liberation and remembrance. Across richly textured canvases, Olayombo depicts child riders as storytellers and sovereigns, reclaiming a history shaped by colonial trade, exchange, and erasure. His process, defined by layers of oil, acrylic, and pastel carved with a palette knife, draws from Yoruba scarification traditions to inscribe memory and resilience into each surface. The works, painted in tender pinks and ochres, navigate the space between wound and repair, childhood and history, presence and absence. In this conversation, Olayombo reflects on vulnerability, time, and the radical softness that defines his practice.

ART AFRICA: In ‘Canter Days’, the child rider emerges as both sovereign and storyteller — a radical inversion of the colonial image of the rider. What first drew you to this motif, and how did it evolve from a childhood fascination into a gesture of cultural reclamation?

Samuel Olayombo: As a child growing up in Nigeria, I was fascinated by the cowboy figures I saw in Western movies. Those images stayed with me — the freedom, the power, the drama of the rider. Later in my artistic journey, I began to question why the image of the rider always seemed to belong to conquest or colonial narratives. During my research, I discovered that in parts of what we now know as Nigeria, Benin, and Ghana, humans were once traded in exchange for horses. That history completely changed how I saw the horse — no longer as a symbol of dominance, but as one of resilience and memory. In ‘Canter Days’, I reimagine the rider as a child — pure, sovereign, and free — transforming what was once a tool of subjugation into an emblem of liberation and rebirth. The child becomes a storyteller, carrying both ancestral memory and the hope of healing.



Installation view of 'Canter Days: When Gallop Was the Scroll' at Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery, Luxembourg. Courtesy of the artist and Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery.

Your paintings are intensely tactile — built from layers of oil, acrylic, charcoal, and pastel, scraped and sculpted with a palette knife until they resemble living skin. How did this technique develop, and what does texture allow you to express that line or colour alone cannot?

My tactile process began during the COVID-19 lockdown when I was painting in isolation. I had borrowed money from a friend to buy supplies and started experimenting with new ways of layering paint. That period of confinement made me reflect on my Yoruba heritage, especially the tradition of body-marking from my hometown, Ile-Ife. I started using my palette knife as my own version of Abe, the Yoruba carving knife, once used to inscribe marks on the skin. Every stroke became a mark of time, emotion, and history. The texture allows me to inscribe memory directly into the surface of the painting — to make the canvas feel alive, like skin that remembers touch and struggle. Line and colour can describe form, but texture carries truth; it embodies persistence.

The surface of your work carries both pain and persistence — the palette-knife marks feel like scars that record time. Do you think of painting as an act of wounding, of healing, or as something in between?

For me, painting exists in the space between wounding and healing. The act of scraping, layering, and cutting into the surface is both violent and redemptive. It's like opening old scars to let them breathe. The marks I make are not only about pain — they also celebrate endurance. I see the canvas as a body that has lived, a witness to transformation. Each mark is both a wound and a repair. Painting, in that sense, becomes a form of meditation, a slow process of reconciling with time, memory, and emotion.



Samuel Olayombo, *Fly Me To The Moon*, 2025. Acrylic on Canvas, 144 x 197cm. Courtesy of the artist and Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery.

Pink and other tender tones recur throughout your work — colours long coded as delicate or feminine. How do you use colour to complicate ideas of masculinity, and what role does vulnerability play in your visual language?

Pink became a language of softness for me — a way to challenge how we define strength. In my Cotton Candy Rangers series, I painted cowboys dressed in pink to confront the stereotype of masculinity as rigid or emotionless. For me, tenderness is not weakness; it's a kind of power. Colour, in that sense, becomes emotional code. It allows me to express care, empathy, and humanity — things often excluded from traditional representations of men, especially in African culture. Vulnerability is central to my practice because I believe that to heal collectively, we must first learn to be open. My use of soft tones isn't about beauty alone — it's about redefining what courage can look like.

You've described your practice as rooted "before the scroll" — before digital timelines and algorithmic memory. How does that analogue sensibility shape your process and your relationship with slowness, touch, and storytelling?

The phrase "before the scroll" came from my reflection on how we consume images today. We're constantly scrolling — endlessly, almost without feeling. But I grew up in a time when imagination and storytelling came from physical interaction — from drawing in the sand, watching the world outside, playing, and creating. That analogue experience shaped how I approach painting. I work slowly, allowing each layer of texture and colour to carry its own memory. My paintings are tactile because I want viewers to feel before they think. In a world obsessed with speed, slowness has become a radical act. It's my way of resisting the digital flattening of emotion and time.



Installation view of 'Canter Days: When Gallop Was the Scroll' at Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery, Luxembourg. Courtesy of the artist and Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery.

Your riders seem suspended between worlds — part myth, part memory, part contemporary portraiture. When you paint these children, do you imagine them dreaming, remembering, or returning to something lost?

I see them as all three — dreaming, remembering, and returning. They inhabit a space where history and imagination meet. The children on horseback are carriers of lost narratives; they return to the stories erased by colonialism but also dream forward into new possibilities. When I paint them, I imagine them moving freely between the past and the present, embodying resilience and renewal. They are not victims of history; they are its re-authors. In their innocence, there's wisdom. In their movement, there's restoration. They remind me — and hopefully the viewer — that liberation begins with how we choose to remember.

'Canter Days: When Gallop Was the Scroll' is on view at Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery, Luxembourg, until 8 November 2025. Learn more at www.zidoun-bossuyt.com.