



Naïfs Magazine



INFLUENCERS

SAMUEL OLAYOMBO

PINK IS THE NEW BLUE



FOR SAMUEL OLAYOMBO, PINK IS THE NEW BLUE

EN The color pink is as feminine as it is political. Its significance in Western cultures, as well as its relationship with gender, imbues it with deep meanings and symbols. For artist Samuel Olayombo, pink is a way to resignify masculinity and soften men. His latest series is an ode to pink—its different nuances, its political nature, and its transformative power.

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His latest series is an ode to pink—its different nuances, its political nature, and its transformative power. Olayombo's iconography is like a puzzle; each element in his art is connected to the others and to his experience as both a man and a human, carrying deep meaning and delivering a poignant message to the viewer. Samuel's art is personal, but it resonates so profoundly with the human experience that it becomes political. We spoke to Samuel about his latest exhibition, *Transposition*, his inspiration behind it, and how uncomfortable his male privilege makes him feel.

CAROLINA BENJUMEA – I would like to know about your relationship to music and art. How did these two meet and complement your world as an artist?

SAMUEL OLAYOMBO – I think music and art are the same because they are both means of expressing one's emotions. In music, you express yourself by the sounds you create. In art, it is done through different media or mediums. It could be painting. It could be found in objects, it could be performance. You know, I think there's a similarity between music and artistic expression. One is sound, related to the ears, while the other is visual, related to the eyes.

C.B. – Do you think you can express better through sound or through the visual?

S.O. – I can't really say. Music it's actually the same passion as art. I am part of a choral group, where I sing and also with my little knowledge I direct. I think, for now, through paintings, because I'm not a professional musician. I just do music for pleasure, not professionally. But I paint professionally, so I think I express myself better with painting than with music.

C.B. – The technique you use to portray the skin is very interesting. How do you achieve this effect?

S.O. – During COVID, when it was the lockdown, I started experimenting with different ideas. I decided to look inward and began exploring a culture from my place of origin. The texture is inspired by the body-marking culture of where I'm from—The Yoruba, a pre-colonial culture. This technique is inspired by those lines, which have their own purpose. One of the purposes of body marking is identification. Back then, there was a lot of capturing of slaves.



BLUE SCALE ON PINK SHEET, 2024, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 198.5 X 248 CM (78 1/8 X 97 5/8 IN) (OLAY 022)

So, when a child was born, the marks were inscribed on the face; in case the child got captured and later escaped, people around would be able to help trace him back home using these marks.

C.B. – So, you talked to me about a situation with a music group where they assigned you as the lead vocalist, even though there was someone more competent than you, which made you recognize your privilege as a male. This power struggle also happens in the arts industry. Do you think that this specific situation changed the way you saw your art, the way you approached your art, and the way you viewed the art industry?

S.O. – It's the reason why I added that to my narrative, you know—to question why leadership is not based on merit, and why sometimes it is based on gender instead of merit. These are the questions that I'm asking because of my own experience. It's something I've experienced; I went through it. When I gave [the leadership] to someone who I felt was more knowledgeable than me, I understood the impact it had on me and also on the group itself. Not just on me, but on the group. And I feel the same ideologies apply to any situation where we embrace merit, or leadership is given to those who deserve it—not because I'm a male. I don't believe in gender superiority.

C.B. – In this series, we see two men who appear very masculine, but the colors of the paintings are soft and delicate, which makes the characters seem vulnerable, far from the idea of the macho man. Could you explain why you included this type of character and color?

S.O. – The color is inspired by growing up with five sisters. I saw how they were treated growing up. They weren't given the same attention the men were given, and I believe they would have been better if the same attention given to the males was given to them. Because the ideology back then was that, as long as you're a female, the expectation is that when you grow up, you marry, then you give birth, and that's all society expects from a female. I believe there's more to it. Just imagine if I hadn't met that woman, Samira, who taught me. Just imagine if all she could do was give birth and go on like that. I believe anyone has the potential to be great, and equal opportunity should be given to everyone, to become whatever they've chosen, whatever they want to become.

C.B. – Why do you think it's important for you, as a man, to approach gender issues in your work? Usually, we see women addressing these topics, but men not so much.

S.O. – I think it's important as a man, because going forward, it's going to have an effect. There's going to be an imbalance if it's not addressed. The reason why I'm using pink is because of its symbolism. You know, there's something else I wanted to mention. In old Yoruba society, there was a culture called Aroko. Aroko is a non-verbal, semiotic means of communication where you convey messages through objects and colors. For example, if I'm giving you a bottle of water, it doesn't mean it's just bottled water. There's a message behind it. It's the same philosophy I'm applying to the use of pink. Pink has its symbolism. It stands for softness, kindness, nurturing, and compassion. These are attributes we typically expect only from females. It's why, in many places, especially where I'm from, as long as a man can provide for his family, that's all that's expected of him. But I'm trying to change that perspective. It's not complete. Being a provider is important, but it's not enough. You also need to participate in the nurturing of the child and the family. I know, as a man, you can't be pregnant, and you can't breastfeed, but your presence and participation are equally important. If not, there are different challenges that contemporary humans are facing today. One of them is depression, and one of the reasons for depression is toxic shame, where people use social media and others' public lifestyles to judge their own private lives. Imagine 10 years from now—the kids we'll be raising—imagine if there is no one to help them understand the importance of self-acceptance. Imagine the rates of depression we are going to face 10 years from now. So, I believe everyone's hand must be on deck—both the father and the mother. While you're providing, your presence must also be there.

C.B. – There's a lot of iconographies and meaning of jazz music in your work. Why is it important to incorporate jazz music into your world as an artist?

S.O. – I would liken the birth of jazz to the existence of both genders. Jazz emanated from the combination of African rhythms with European chord movements. That is how I perceive jazz. Jazz is not complete without these two elements. In the same way, human beings are not complete without the plural gender. In jazz, it doesn't mean that the rhythm is superior to the chord movements, it simply means they are both equal, and neither can be downplayed. The same applies to the existence of humans. As a male, I'm equally important as a female, and vice versa—there is no superiority. The existence of both is equally important. That's the reason why I chose jazz.

"PINK HAS ITS SYMBOLISM. IT STANDS FOR SOFTNESS, KINDNESS, NURTURING, AND COMPASSION."

CHARLES HARMONY, 2024, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 141 X 137 CM (55 1/2 X 54 IN) (OLAY-032)





NATH APPREGGIO, 2024, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 141 X 137 CM (55 1/2 X 54 IN) (OLAY-035)



STRUMMING WITHOUT STRINGS, 2024, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 150 X 144 CM (59 X 56 3/4 IN) (OLAY-034)

MICHAEL CHERRYFIELD, 2025, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 202 X 138 X 38 CM (79 X 54 1/4 X 15 IN) (OLAY-036)



C.B. – Your paintings are full of social meanings. You address many social issues, such as gender, vulnerability, and global warming. Do you think a painting can be only aesthetically pleasing and pretty? Or do you believe that each painting should have a meaning or a social message?

S.O. – I think the beauty of contemporary art is the fact that it comes with concepts. It conveys the artist's opinion, which is why contemporary art differs from classical art. The value of classical art is often reduced to technicality, whereas contemporary art carries its message. If there is no angle or perspective, I don't think it's contemporary art. The message is important; I don't believe an artwork ends with the frame. I believe it continues with the viewers. What are they seeing? What is the work communicating to them when they look at it? That is equally important. I know the artist has his or her own interpretation, but the viewer should be able to generate his or her own perspective on a particular piece. I believe a strong artwork should speak to the viewer.

C.B. – There are a lot of little details in your work, and each detail has a different meaning and a special message. However, when you are the viewer, you don't necessarily see all of these little details. What is the overall message that you want people to feel when they see your work?

S.O. – The overall message is humanity. Humanity comes first; it comes before gender. The essence of all my paintings is humanizing our expectations. When you look at someone, what do you expect from that person?

C.B. – You are from Nigeria, but you have exhibited your work around the globe in many countries. What do you want to show about Africa to the world of contemporary art?

S.O. – What do I want to show about Africa? Africa has always been present. I don't think there is anything specific I want to show about Africa; I just want to explore different possibilities. If you look at my paintings, you will see that pink is not a color typically associated with Africa. I perceive pink as a color that resonates across cultures. I know that Indians and other cultures use pink, but my first perception was influenced by the Western canon. I want to explore different universal elements. I don't want to limit my painting to Africa. You can see some African-inspired elements in my paintings, as well as European-inspired elements. That's how I want my practice to be. It should not be limited to where I'm from; it should speak to all humans.

Written by Carolins Benjumes.
Translated by Cécile Seynaeve.