TRANSCRIPT

On Storytelling: Toyin Ojih Odutola in conversation with Erin J. Gilbert

Recorded on March 10, 2022

Erin J. Gilbert: Hi, Toyin!

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Hey.

Erin J. Gilbert: Thank you.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Thank you.

Erin J. Gilbert: No, thank you for this body of work. Thank you for this exhibition. Thank you for sharing it with us all. And thank you for taking time out to have a conversation with me about the work today.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: I appreciate it. Thank you.

Erin J. Gilbert: So today, today, about three years from when you began this process. From the moment that the work was complete. And from the moment that it began to circulate throughout the world, literally you've had eight museum exhibitions and this exhibition, which is now here at the Hirshhorn, began at the Barbican in October of 2019 or 2020, rather. Let's talk about what it feels like to now have this work be seen in an American context. And we can back into the ways in which this work began as something that was supposed to start and has started. I think, a global dialogue around the nature, not just of your own practice, but, um, around the kind of narrative that you are, um, espousing through this work. So how does it feel?

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Honestly, it feels really surreal being here. I'm very glad that I'm here with you, because I feel like you're one of the very few people who has been through the entire process. So there's a lot of, um, mixed emotions, but, um, I'm very proud of this body of work. As you know, I think that what had started as an attempt to claim a space for myself, a Nigeria in my imaginary, sort of evolved into something else, which I don't think is necessarily a bad thing. I think that's very natural, especially when contexts have shifted so much in the span of time that from making it to its exhibition run. And one thing that sticks out for me more than anything is that I look at this and I, I don't know her. Like, that's been the hardest thing to kind of mitigate in my brain. And there was so much planning. There was a lot of research. There was a lot of toll that it took to make this work. And I think in the end, I'm glad that it happened. I'm very proud, again, about what transpired, but there's a part of me that's very, um, like this won't happen again, you know?

Erin J. Gilbert: Oh, you mean you won't make 40 canvases of varying sizes undulating through a fully immersive. In four museums during a pandemic protests, insurrection and possible world war again, you don't do that again.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: No, I don't think that's going to happen anytime.

Erin J. Gilbert: Uh, I think that's fair, but I do think you have to be extremely proud of having produced such a comprehensive, um, body of work. It is 40 canvases. And you said, you know, that it took a toll on you. I do think that the amount of labor that it takes to use your physical body alone. You don't have assistants. You don't have a team. You literally engage with each one of these canvases, each one of these, um, are your own imagination and your own activity, your own set of interactions. Do you want to talk about the labor of making and then we can talk about the labor of exhibition making? Because you are also in full control of that. You're in many ways your own curator, um, and in many ways engaged in the process of every aspect of the installation. But let's talk first about the actual work itself.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: I mean, the thing that's, it's really interesting that the process of you walking through this is actually very akin into how it was made. Um, the very first piece you see is the very first piece I made in this style, and I find it - I work really well when I don't know what I'm doing at first. So a lot of the first drawings were like tests. Just trying to figure out the material narrative, as you mentioned earlier, trying to understand what form, you know, chasing after the form. And I always try to get something that's elegant and not too simple, but subtle. And so there were a lot of trial and errors, and there were pieces that were at once discarded and then ended up coming back. And so there was a lot of that kind of stop and starts, and it doesn't necessarily engender confidence when you're in this stage, but it's essential in the process. But once I really kind of figured out what the materials would be, what the surface ground would be, then it was the research. Then it was like figuring out Jos plateau as an arena for this story, you know, learning about the Nok of that region, learning about the ecological, you know, like the biodiversity of that region and how to implement that into the work in some way, whether it be through the mark making itself or through the story that I was writing. And in that research, it was tough, but I felt kind of giddy during that time, because all of that, um, insecurity that I may have had prior, uh, when I was testing things out early on, it sort of kind of flattened out and I felt a little bit more like, I think I can do this. I think this could work. I didn't think it was going to be 40 pieces, but I thought I could probably make a solid show. I didn't really start actively making the body of work until late 2019. Um, and that was a lot, it, you know, I don't know how other people work, uh, but I am alone. And so you don't just wake up one day and do this it's every day and you have to approach every picture, not in this sort of like hubris, but in this kind of like conversation, like, I don't want to impose what I think it should be, but I, I want to open myself up to what it might be and there's like a tug and pull with that. And so that was every single piece in this show. And in the end, I'm very satisfied with overall, but there are a lot of pieces where in the, in the moment where everything is, so it feels like everything's a risk. Everything is high key, and you're tired. You're most likely malnourished. You're not, your friends are calling you and saying, have you taking care of yourselves today?

Erin J. Gilbert: Slept? Have you eaten?

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Those moments are tough. Those are the things that I actually remember the most now, when I look at this body of work, is that the toll that it took, you know, physically and mentally.

Erin J. Gilbert: Let's talk about the style. It's a word you mentioned earlier and about risk because part of the risk, and as you said, you let the mark making guide you, right? You begin with the mark making and, and it becomes these landscapes. It becomes these figures. It becomes these striations. Um, but let's talk about the palette because your other seven exhibitions are primarily works in color. And you talked about the materiality, so this notion of working in charcoal, working in pastel, is something that you're familiar with, but there's an inverse here where the foreground and the surface have become absolutely integral to understanding your mark making at a totally different level because it's black. That in and of itself, I think is one of the risks that you took. And can you talk for a little bit about why, and we'll back into the narrative, but why you chose to work in this palette as opposed to full color?

Toyin Ojih Odutola: I think there's black as a ground is I think what I had initially thought was very contentious, but for me, black is a ground was really, not only forgiving, but extremely versatile. I found it very soothing as a surface. Um, I liked working on it and the more I worked on it, the more familiarized I got. The easier it was for me to make the work. But it's also like a history of that ground is very interesting to me. And I wanted to engage with that. I liked the idea that I'm starting from a place that’s already been marked. Um, at least that's how I felt when I was working.

Erin J. Gilbert: Let’s talk about the history of that ground, because when you say the history of that ground, I think about the black square, I think about Malevich. I think about that history of abstraction that's rooted in that kind of interception of a darkness, interception of a pallet and what emerges out of that or what may be behind that, but when you say it, what is it that you mean?

Toyin Ojih Odutola: It's definitely with within the darkness, like I found darkness to be very enveloping in a positive way. I didn't see it as something that was dangerous or housed any sort of unknowns that might attack, you know, in some folkloric –

Erin J. Gilbert: Not a negative space in any way, right.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Yeah. Some, you know, occidental idea of what darkness may mean. It was very much trying to go back to the continent, to go back to Jos, and to use that as the surface became Jos, the surface became a place, and it was a place that I built. And you know, when you're starting out, you don't know if this space is or this place is important or this place is going to carry you, but it did. I'm working from scratch. You know, everything was purely just on

the day. You know, this is what I'm tackling on the day and that's, it's scary. But then you, you get to a place where you're like the scariness is kind of moot. It's moot of the point, I guess, is the phrase. It doesn't matter in the end because once you start getting into like a rhythm and the marks start to kind of pile on top. Everything just somehow, just came together so beautifully. There were struggles, but it wasn't quite that, that black surface, that darkness was a blessing is what I'm trying to say.

Erin J. Gilbert: And you also talked about a place. So you were born in Ife. Nigeria is your ancestral home. It is your biological home. Um, this notion of the place and of place-making I think is really important to your practice. I think home and family are really important to your practice, but this black ground functioned as the way in which you were able to engage black shale rock and bring us into this narrative, right? Bring us into this kind of place that in and of itself as an archeological site was a black physical space, right. Black rock. So let's just talk a little bit about how it is that you came to Jos as an idea, as a space, as a place that you wanted to excavate or mine as an artist. And then we can get into your actual narrative.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: There was something you told me at a crux moment in the series where he said it's ancient and futuristic at the same time. And that was sort of a catalyst for me to think about Jos. I was also thinking about the Olmec, and I think I watched a documentary around the same time and I was working. And so I thought about basalt rock. I thought about ancient, you know, mineral rocks that are like millions of years old and the geology of that. And it was fascinating. And of course, prior to that, I've always had, you know, the Ife Head and the story of the Ife Head. And I wanted to engage with that as well, because it wasn't so much the Ife Head as an object, as a historical object. It was how it moved, where it went, how it was the culture of which had housed it, where it was fruitful and had this beautiful space to flourish and how it was literally taken from that and brought to another context and how that completely devoided it and removed it of its specialness, removed it of its beauty. And I had felt in some way on connecting it, maybe tangentially, but as someone who was a migrant, I left and I felt like as, even as a kid growing up, that there was a lot of parts of me that were lost, truly lost. Like I can't, I don't speak Yoruba anymore. You know, there's a lot of things that I can't claim anymore. And I felt like I couldn't claim it. I didn't have a right to it. So the Nigeria in my mind, obviously the Nigeria I was born and grew up in doesn't even exist anymore. But also the Nigeria that I imagined I belong to doesn't exist. And it's a very sad space to be in as a kid and to grow up feeling that way. But what I felt in the making of this work was a return, a return to something like I mentioned early in imaginary. It may not be real, but it's a place I can at least say, that's where I belong. That's the Nigeria that –

Erin J. Gilbert: And it’s a reclaiming for you. It’s a way of reclaiming that.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Yeah.

Erin J. Gilbert: Um, I think you've talked about this before and perhaps, you know, we don't need to delve too much into it for the purpose of this talk just because you've done that

already. But this notion that you also heard a BBC special on 100 objects and that there was a focus on the Benin bronzes. For context, I had worked at the Art Institute of Chicago when the Benin – Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria exhibition began. Right. So that notion that in 1897, there had been the plunder and all of these objects have been removed from the continent and had been taken to Vienna, to Berlin and from Europe then to the U S.

And so for you listening to that series of statements around whether or not the Benin bronzes could have been created by people of African descent. A question around intelligence, the question around that notion of elegance.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Of skill.

Erin J. Gilbert: Right. Can you talk about how that affected you and how this kind of idea of reclaiming both your own personal right to a Nigerian identity and art making practice, but then also what does that hearing, you know, what does it feel like to hear those claims on African intelligence? Um, and artistic ability and skill.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: And output. It's like who has the right to tell their own stories? You know, it's the same thing and it's - the problem isn't so much that, it's that the stories are the same. It's like you keep taking the things and the stories are the exact same thing. It's at least you can have a little of imagination and there's not applied. So it's, the irony of like our complaint about this, like, oh, you're taking this out, it's that you keep applying the same story to these objects, to these people, to a people, to a land that is not only such a limitation, a flattening, but it doesn't even add anything. It does nothing.

Erin J. Gilbert: But it also is not rooted in any type of reality, right? It's a projection.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: No, absolutely. But I mean that, that projection is so limited in its imaginary that it's like, why bother? You know? And that is history. And I thought a lot about mythology when I was making this work, I thought about, you know, that is the original history. So why not create my own mythology? Let's work on this exercise. Let's build a parable, like as, as one would do with the Greeks or the Romans. Yeah. Have it have this kind of irrefutable city to it, that everything here is purposeful. Everything here is meant to be here. Even if, as you say, as so much of history, it's made up, it's invented. And yet there's so much stake; there's lives put on that invention. And there are actual, not only objects, but people who have moved and been forced to move and continue to be moved throughout the world because of these stories that, again, are so limiting, so flattening and they benefit no one. The process of making this, the creating this narrative wasn't so much just for myself claim an imaginary, Nigeria, but a safe place for ideas to flourish that are different, that yeah do flip the script in every aspect, but it's another way. And it gives options, you know, for other ways to explore a humanity. So much of our ideas of humanity that I had seen prior to making this body of work, were - I felt very colonist. And it was really difficult to deal with that. You know I was coming out of the MoAD

and Whitney and SCAD and stuff. And I was just feeling like this is not even my visual language. This is something I've been taught. This is something that I've had to acclimate to. I have to completely unmoor myself from that. I have to completely open myself up to a possibility of not knowing. And it was really scary because I was doing something completely different. It's - there's no color. There's no hue to hide behind. It's pure gradation and it's on the walls.

Erin J. Gilbert: And it's pure skill, right?

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Yeah. It's the line. It's like you're really testing your ability and, you know, that's a scary place to be because even if you think you're good, no one thinks they're that good? Well, I don't know, but you know, and it's like every day you have to say that not only am I good, that this has a right to be made and it's not just about me seeing it, it's about seeing a queerness. It's about seeing women unencumbered by a gaze, you know, men who for once are vulnerable, that has nothing to do with their power or their strength, but it's just with them being close to someone, being intimate with someone. These are things that I was thinking about. And it's not something very, you know, far-flung, they're very foundational things, but in the making, I found the courage to do that. And I think what I hope that, you know, as it's coming to a close, is that people understand that I failed a lot in making them, you know. There's a lot of failure in this body of work and there's a lot of moments that I'm not proud of in the making of it. The toll. And in looking at it now and walking through it, I just hope that whoever sees it understands that the person who made this really was, I think struggling isn't the word, but they weren't in the best place, you know. And they still pushed through it.

Erin J. Gilbert: But were they in a place of discovery? Were they in place of expansion, because –

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Of opening up to that, yes, absolutely.

Erin J. Gilbert: Absolutely. And I think that, you know, this notion of failure is rooted in the risk. Right? You can only fail if you're taking a risk. I don't think any of us would see failure in any of this work. I don't think that any of us would see, because it's so precise, because there's such a complete quality to each one of these works, that there is a world within each one of these 40 canvases of varying degrees in sizes that feels entirely unique in and of itself, but entirely complete. You move from having embryos to having 20-30 faces all in one canvas. So there's a range, I think. And within that, I think you know where there were mistakes and where there were elements of surprise and elements of distinction between what you thought might happen and what was actually executed. But certainly I don't think that's how we would come to it. I want to just go back for one second and say that this notion of you yourself having moved and the relationship between the Ife head having moved in the Benin bronze is having moved. You know, we're in the moment now where even the Smithsonian has agreed to return 39 objects from the African Art Museum to Nigeria, right. To the continent specifically. And it is that those objects act as document. Those objects act as histories. Those objects have within them, not just evidence of skill and evidence of intelligence, but also histories and cultural

power that I think your work also possesses. And so I see a lineage between that work and your work and the simultaneity of it moving globally I think is very important. and just wanted to point out. But in terms of this work, which, you know, we could talk about perhaps as historical fiction from a literary perspective. And I think we'll talk a little bit about all the literary influences that you've had along the way and how that has allowed you to build these worlds and to build such complete narratives, but your role in them I think is extremely important. That you are both able to participate as author, but then also as a narrator. And for the purpose of this, which has two main characters, and I'd like to talk about those characters and to talk about the plot, you know, there are the three elements of the story itself, but you're the archeologist and you are the director of the Jos Plateau Research Initiative.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Yeah. It's quite a title.

Erin J. Gilbert: Well, I think it's appropriate. And I do remember specific moments when you were working through this language of how you would position yourself.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: As dry as possible. Scientific jargon. I've never read so many scientific publications in my life. Never again.

Erin J. Gilbert: But it speaks to your research process. Right? I think that one of the things that I love about you and have deep appreciation for is your commitment to research. Is your commitment to an intersection of history and fiction, right. To that kind of imaginary, but it's an informed imaginary. I want to read a little bit from your book, because I think there's some key points in the beginning of your introduction that might help situate the entire narrative. You say at present, our investigations are ongoing. Initial review results, reveal pictorial markings, indicative of civilization predating the oldest civilization indigenous to the region. The Nok. Idiosyncratic motifs and striations are suggestive of a culture accustomed to advance tools in art making, and the gathering of rocks allude to some kind of deliberate arrangement. From what we could salvage in our digital scans, the collection reads as an otherworldly parable with visual representations of humanoid figures in landscape dramas, aesthetically aquatic and stylistically organic. The plethora of odd transitions in texture complicates any notion of sole authorship. And for me, the key words that kind of refute this notion of the director of an initiative being an expert, right?

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Right.

Erin J. Gilbert: Is that you say ongoing, meaning it is not just the present moment, it is not just the past, but it really must continue. Our investigation must continue. Um, you mentioned the Nok, which I think is important because you are saying even before what we knew existed in the Nok, we are asserting that there was something civilized, right? A civilization before that, again another kind of refuting. You talk about art making, as opposed to the way in which sculptures, statues, objects that come out of the continent, are often called artifacts. They're

not thought of as art works with you know, not anonymous creators, but specific kind of creators. But then you also refute that with saying perhaps no sole authorship. Which is also a non-Western way of understanding the process and the engagement with the work of art, right?

Toyin Ojih Odutola: The cyclical nature of things, which is very much in line, at least in Yoruban culture. But I also, you know, because this is such a cinematic narrative in such a grand story, like I did want to bring it into reality. I wanted to bring it into our world. As you see in the text with the research, like, you know, Jos Plateau Research Initiative, that is a means of bridging, you know, taking it away from the fantastical and bringing it into reality. There are minings that are going on from foreign investors and interventions. And there are like a lot of, I would say, I wouldn't say, but it is happening. It's incited, you know, tribal incidences based on capitalistic greed. These things are environmental concerns. These things are cultural concerns. Obviously.

Erin J. Gilbert: Topographical change.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: They're also, you know, people are dying. So there's a lot at stake in that sense. It's not just me being flippant and saying here's this fun text. Like this is really happening right now. And, again, it goes back to who has the right to do this? You know, just because someone has, for instance, in this case, the money and the means to go and extract from a land. And here I am as a miner or an archeologist, I'm trying to go deeper to claim something else. when everything else has been stripped on the surface what's left? And that was what I was trying to find. And what I found was that the creativity is a well; it's always there, you know. There's this sense, again, coming back from previous works that I felt that I was lacking something. And the gift of this body of work was that I felt that I was gifted so much from that space of lack. I found abundance, you know, and it was truly powerful for me to find moments in certain pieces in the show when I was working, that it was that feeling of like, this is always going to keep, it's always going to be unsettled. It's never going to be done. And that's the work, you know, that's it. You have to accept that. And there's a lot of demand, maybe culturally, where people feel like they have to pin something down, they have to be finite. And there's a lot of pieces in this show that fight that, you know. That, that push against that.

Erin J. Gilbert: Um, just in terms of the scans, which are not an extraction, but a way of visibly representing what's there. Right? So you, in and of yourself as an archeologist have made a determination not to remove the objects and not to create another disruption to the landscape in the way that you say is happening and has been happening, right, that would physically alter the land. And there's a work called Altered Landscape. But this notion of you having the sensitivity to both the space and the communities living there to say we do need the narrative to be seen, but we would use scans, which then became a framework, right, for you in terms of, not just the black and white, but these striations. These gradations and this kind of way in which the mark making also had a dual purpose.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Well it's developing the visual language of that. You know, the striations is like, how do you try to pinpoint something that is impossible to describe. You know, there's this feeling of like picture should fulfill things that words fail, you know, and vice versa. Like I shouldn't try to supplement things with, you know, the texts being what it is. It stays there for this purpose. The images are read as you go through it. And so what is needed should be absolutely essential, and what isn't shouldn't even have to be there.

Erin J. Gilbert: So they become minimalist even.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Exactly. So you have to make everything to its pure essence. And so the striations, as you know, is that world. That is the oppression. It's so molecular It's in the makeup of the people. It's in the air they breathe. It's in the landscape. It's everywhere.

Erin J. Gilbert: It's a system, you said.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: It's an absolutely impossible to escape system. And in that you have to find these two people's resistance very, it's kind of, it's very romantic.

Erin J. Gilbert: Let's talk about Aldo and Akanke and the romance and the way in which women function in this society and the way in which the male humanoid figures function. Let's talk about them.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: I wanted to create women. No, I dunno if I should curse, but didn't give a __ about anything, you know. That was so freeing to create, you know. They didn't even care what I thought in the making of the, you know, there were moments where I was like, well, okay, then you need to do that. And, it was really freeing to create a women in that way, but I also was cognizant of the fact that they are the ones in power. They are the ones who are in control, everything benefits of them in this world. And the Koba, which is Aldo's sort of class, they are the complete opposite in every way. And you know, that was really difficult, and it was very psychological, some of those pictures, because they are manufactured. They are made. So their one sole purpose is their function. And they have no identity outside of that function. And so to draw that out over time was really interesting. And finally when I brought the moment when they do meet, it was really exciting because it was a dynamic. And it was a few sketches I had that didn't quite make the cut, but, um, I really love those moments when they meet. Because it's genuine, you know. It's like anyone who meets someone who they're intrigued by. I mean, of course the circumstances here are a little different. Um, the power dynamics are definitely different, but one of the things that I was very careful of was the moment that Akanke listens to Aldo. Aldo has no stake in her life. She does not care about his existence. She just needs him to fulfill whatever she needs to do. But in this moment, she chooses to listen. That's the disruption. That's really where the shift happens in the story.

Erin J. Gilbert: It's one of my, I don't want to interrupt you, but it's one of my favorite moments. And it's because listening becomes this act of love. But it's also because in the way that the narrative is composed, the power dynamic is that women operate within the context of being Supreme, and that the male, kind of, as you say, manufactured, class are subservient to them, right? So there is a reversal in that. Um, but there's also this way in which –

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Love is expressed between the classes.

Erin J. Gilbert: Love is expressed, but there's this notion of, you know, Gayatri Spivak talks about the subaltern speaks and this way in which the subaltern doesn't lack the ability to speak because they lack language. They lack the political power and agency, and it is because they are not heard by the Supreme class. Right? So this notion that listening comes out of love, but it also opens up the space for change. And that without being heard, there is no change because your proposal is that through the moment of listening and through the moment in which there is love, there's the opportunity for and change in the entire system itself. Right.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Absolutely. It's out of what I was trying to do was like to show that love is understanding. And sometimes there's this claim that was like, “I love this person. I don't understand him,” you know, that phrase. But there's another way to love and that is through listening and allowing someone to speak. And really taking the time to let them fully express themselves. And I think that's something that I maybe - I couldn't see any other form visually to express that way of her saying, “I see you.” Essentially. “I understand.”

Erin J. Gilbert: And she physically covers her mouth.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: And she actually covers her mouth and says, “no, this is your moment. This is your time.” And this is something that's been denied his entire class. No one, not only is he speaking his truth, he's looking directly at her, which is also forbidden in this world. So that moment is really special to me. And I think that it shifts what you think is possible within the story, because these two characters do not have to - Akanke doesn't have to care about Aldo. She has no reason to, but because she listened, she changes herself. She becomes better. She becomes more full-spectrum from having his story incorporated into her life. She now has a new language of expression. And it's something that I tried to create, the forms and the curvatures that show up in the pictures, that's part of that. It seeps into their environment. It's from these two people, but it spreads out into their environment and it alters it. It makes it much more possible for change because of that moment.

Erin J. Gilbert: So within this language of mythmaking within this kind of way in which the marks become symbols, become signs. And as you say, have the kind of alignment of the landscape and then of the figures, and then of the ways in which their changes are evident in that mark-making. You have staffs. You have 15 types of flora and fauna. I remember standing in the studio once going, oh my god, that's a different type of cactus. That's a different type of algae.

That's a different type of rock formation. And as you say, they change throughout the entire structure until we end with Parable Rock, right, which is the two kind of coming together as a monument in many ways to their love and to the ways in which they're kind of morphing emotionally, intellectually, and then physically. Changes the landscape. Do you think that you were kind of counting as you were going through? Were you keeping track of these things or were you really just revisiting as you went through kind of, this is where I am in the narrative. This is how it feels. And you mentioned the curve and I always think about another gesture. Another kind of element or maybe sign or symbol within your work is the way in which hands interact. And as I was thinking about that, I remember looking at a work of their hands, which is then called Vocabulary, right? So it felt as though, without us ever really having that conversation, there was also this understanding of your actually creating a whole other language, as you say, through this set of marks that are evidenced as hands or evidence as cactus or rocks, but certainly have a way of, as you say, being read without a kind of, um, text that is legible in the sense that it can be learned.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Well, it's the most - drawing is the most direct language. It's the oldest language. I mean the first, you know, paleolithic. I'm thinking caves and you know, it's the first mark. So like I knew that whoever comes through this space, whoever visits it, whatever you read is valid. You know what I mean? Because you're tapping into something, I hope, you feel like you're tapping into something very ancient in you because that's how we've, that's the first language it's picture, you know, pictographs. And so that was what I was tapping into with some of the surfaces, the marks, the forms. You know, I wanted to get, again, really fundamental, but still leave room for play. So in terms of how I planned everything or in terms of counting, it wasn't really so much that towards the end, like I had to finish. So that's when I did have to like, okay, what, what picture is that? And where's that going? But early on, it was very free. It was very open, and I was grateful for that time. Um, it was probably like a span of like two months where before the crazy. That moment was - I really am grateful for that because it meant that I could. I felt like I was, you know, when you're alone in the studio, like no one's watching, you know, that feeling of like, oh, you can really play here and you can really test things. And, and when it started becoming more pressurized, it got harder. But yeah, you know, it's like, you want to preserve that freedom as much as possible. And then of course you have to reign it in. You know, like, um, I always made this joke like I made a decision early on and now I have to finish it. You know, like those kinds of. And so it's all about solving the puzzle when it comes to like tying, tidying everything up in the end. So that wasn't as.

Erin J. Gilbert: It's funny that you say that it was an open process in the beginning that you enjoyed the freedom. I was thinking about John Berger, who's a British critic and John Berger's quote is that "drawing is an art form that is fundamentally open and extensive rather than closed and contained. And then it's a manner of probing and in imaginative moment, both on the part of the author and the viewer who perceives it." And I think one of the gifts to an audience is to be told whatever you see. Whatever you, whatever you perceive is accurate. And I do think that a lot of what feels like contemporary art is about confounding the viewer, right? But it is also about them taking time and slowing down and engaging with the work enough to

be able to read it. And along the lines of reading it, I think, you know, you've talked about this kind of ancient mark making practice is the first writing. And when we talked, we talked about the ancient and the futuristic, and I want to kind of delve into that futuristic moment for a bit, because the notion of making a man, the notion of, of them being carved, the notion of them being for a specific function or purpose, and having not necessarily a thought or engagement with their own manufacturer and being able to be disposed of or decomposed at any moment. Likens us to the cyborgs or the robots or the kind of a limit of life we're entering into now.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Automation.

Erin J. Gilbert: Automation, absolutely. And it's something that I think, um, from a literary perspective, we've had clues around, we've had hints that we've had warnings even perhaps around and even before we're specific, I'd love to know from you, whether or not you had the sensibility of this also being a kind of narrative that could exist in the future between a kind of human and humanoid form really.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Oh, I never really thought of it that way. I mean, the arena of this humanoid-human dynamic was purely fantasy. And, you know, we've talked about Octavia E Butler, and I'm thinking a lot about even Ursula Le Guin and a lot of stories that, what the humanoid as a literary figure, how it operates, is really interesting because they're not quite human. And so you can play with their process - or at least how do I describe this - how you present them. Like the first thing you see with Aldo is his memory, and then it's gone of his shadow and you know, how shadows are very important. They're your essence in this world. I find shadows to be very important in my work overall, and that's also tapping into ancestral. But he doesn't have any other reckoning of himself in the rest of the work until he meets Akanke. So that moment, that first thing you see, is the one time where he's beyond his humanoid identity and he's in this metaphysical world, but, you know, that's, that's kind of tricky to do and you have to go through the whole thing to kind of understand why it's important, but finding those things were actually not that difficult. Um, the love, the dynamic between them I wasn't really thinking that. I think what I was more concerned about was whether it would translate that their love was really, I guess the word I'm looking for is that it felt true. You know, it felt like it was really profound.

Erin J. Gilbert: You know it's interesting because when I think about this body of work, and then I obviously think about all that we've seen in the world and this notion of change, this notion of revolution, I think about love as revolutionary. So it's very, um, possible and probable and even real to me, that two people coming together in alignment around -

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Of different experiences. Of different languages.

Erin J. Gilbert: That you would only sacrifice at that level if it was real. Right. So for me, it is believable. And I think looking at the works and looking at the kind of intimacy that they share,

that is not necessarily required. Right. And it's not necessarily something that had to be evidenced by you as a part of the way that you told the story, but is an undeniable kind of evidence of, I think love.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Yeah.

Erin J. Gilbert: I'm intrigued by the work that gives us an act of love is kind as cunnilingus, right? That talks about the ways in which this kind of writing of a love poem.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Well, it's speaking it into you. I found it very romantic. I know it seems like it's dirty, but it's not. I found it beautiful. My momma found it beautiful and I don't care what nobody say, but you know, that was a moment I thought they don't function sexually. Right. That's not what they're there for. And the Eshu are born through, as you know, the spiritual sort of ushering in of a new being in those pods. So sexuality in this world is only pleasurable for the Eshu. Possibly for the Koba, as you see them when they do mate, and they do get close, but they don't understand it as sexual. So when they come together, I don't think it's sexual. I think it's purely, like, I don't know how else to communicate my appreciation to you. Right? But through this. This new language we formed, I'm speaking it into you and you hold it within you. And of course, in the parable, it births this new idea, this new sort of structurally shifting idea in the form of their children. But that's not a new idea in terms of like a concept, but I was trying to see, like, how do I make this ground in the body with these two in a way that was spiritual, I think. And I really love that picture actually. Um, the more I look at it, the more I really love it, but best believe what I was making it –

Erin J. Gilbert: I remember when you were making it.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: There was some thoughts.

Erin J. Gilbert: I remember when you were making it.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: But now it's like, you know, it's one of those risks that you take and you're like, no, I feel right about it.

Erin J. Gilbert: Well, no. And I mean, I think to go from this act of listening as love to speaking into someone as love has a through line, that again, brings you to this revolutionary point of birthing a new generation. Of birthing a different generation, right. An ideologically and even physically distinctive generation than the one before. Um, and we're not skipping over the death of Aldo. We're not skipping over the way in which he's tried, and Akanke makes the decision not to save him. Right. But to allow that part of his physical -

Toyin Ojih Odutola: To transpire.

Erin J. Gilbert: Exactly.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Because the system is too great. Like it's two individuals against the system, and it's always that same idea. Like these two people ain't going to bring this shit - you know, it's the idea that brings it down, you know? Cause something as conceptual as that has to do something as conceptual as a system. Both have grounding in reality in the sense of like how we go about our days, how do we live? I didn't want it to be this like Marvel film, you know, like they're gonna fail. Like they're just two people. But many, many years, they're not going to see what happens. Of course they're not. But it still ushers in the change. And that's kinda my way of trying to be hopeful, um, in this. But I also want it to be a little bit realistic about - they did something forbidden and someone had to be punished. Unfortunately, it was Aldo.

Erin J. Gilbert: You know, I think what's so interesting about ways in which the work has been read in London and then here, is that the focus on queerness and the focus on same gender love, I think missed a lot of what you've discussed here in terms of the function of that love, the function of the listening. And I think that it is important to have understood why all of that was important. Why the same gender and then why this kind of risk taking was important, but it brings us to something we mentioned earlier but seems to be underlying this notion of the birth of a new generation, which is the concept of eugenics, right? This concept of being able to shape shift the way that the world looks through breeding. Right. Which you know exactly what I'm thinking about, you know, Octavia Butler. And in particular Wild Seed.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Wild Seed. Yeah.

Erin J. Gilbert: And tell me, did that

Toyin Ojih Odutola: I mean, of course. I mean Doro's plight. For sure. I mean, definitely like generation upon generation, but in this case, this is the usurping, you know. Whereas his is like trying to, which is again, not what Octavia was pulling from, wasn't far flung at all. Again, it's like she's tapping into historically what people have been doing. I'm thinking even about Spain, they had, was it the Casta?

Erin J. Gilbert: Absolutely.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Where they literally went to, they painted what someone in every, you know, colonized country would look like half Spanish. Like they made it a whole, you know, category.

Erin J. Gilbert: And caste system.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: And caste system. And of course this is prevalent in many countries, unfortunately, historically, but what I was trying to tap in was using that language of the

breeding and of that wild seed lore. But to again, go back to someplace hopeful, to go back to a place that ends open enough that, you know, people can interpret it in a positive light, I hope, but also grounding it with the reality. There are systems in place right now in central Nigeria, there are stories like this all over the world that are being unearthed every day, discovered every day. And it's a matter of respect to not just simply acknowledge them, but incorporate them into the history that we all have to learn. It's a lot of work, but it helps because like Akanke, you learn so much. It's like, why would you deny yourself this other aspect of language? Of Ideas. Of realities. Simply because it's hard or you're scared, or, you know, it's too risky, whatever. It still makes your life so much better than it was before.

Erin J. Gilbert: Everyone's lives.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: It's not a loss, you know? And I discover that in the making. I think I came into this parable thinking, what happens when you flip the script? Does anything change? No. Nothing changed because power is absolutely corrupting. But what I do find that was very helpful was that return. It was this feeling like I'm not coming from a place of lack or loss, that I'm gaining more from this.

Erin J. Gilbert: You know, when you talk about power is absolutely corrupting. And we think about the ways in which you start out by -

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Absolute power is absolutely corrupting.

Erin J. Gilbert: But you start out by flipping the script, right? You start out by making women who are perceived of as less powerless in this society, the more powerful being and men who are perceived of in this society as more powerful.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Absolutely, yeah. But then when you flip the script, the only reason I did it was because the system becomes more obvious. Right now we're in it, so we don't see it, somehow. So you flip it and this system is very apparently the same. Nothing has changed. Right? And so it's like, you see the problem. This is not difficult concept to understand.

Erin J. Gilbert: Well, looking at you this way because I'm really hoping we get us a part two. I'm really hoping this story continues. And I'm hoping that with Parable Rock, we get the beginning of a incremental change. Right? We talk about the ways in which museums, institutions. The work plundered in the 18 hundreds were sitting for 122 years. As of this year, they've been sitting for 122 years, and they're finally being returned. And I think that is evidence of incremental, slow change. I'm not sure that change is impossible. I think that…

Toyin Ojih Odutola: We have to be more patient. Is that what it is?

Erin J. Gilbert: We have to be patient, but I think we have to be persistent. I think we have to believe in it. I think. You know, when you were making this work, and we were thinking about women and the #MeToo movement here. And we're thinking about, you know, women of color and women of African descent, the notion that we would be sitting here in 2022 with a female vice-president who's also a woman of color wasn't necessarily the way that we understood our positions to be, especially not in the moment of 2019. So I think that the narrative in and of itself is hopeful. And it's hopeful not just because the stories being told in this context, but because the end is essentially a new beginning. And I know that you did that intentionally. I know that this way in which the narrative concludes in many ways in this portion with this landscape that is physically altered and has all of the elements of both the Jos Plateau, but of this other space that is yet to be named in many ways, right. Um, is evidence that there is, that there is change.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: There have been works littered all over the world. When you think that 94% of your cultural birthright is outside of a continent. American doesn't even understand what that means. I mean, like, you know, that's insane. You have replicas in your own country and other countries have your birthright culturally. And that's the norm. I think a lot of people don't understand what that does to a people, what that does to a culture, you know, and that was the place I came from. It was a bit angry. And I ended, cause in the making, in a place that was a much more, still, much more hopeful.

Erin J. Gilbert: I wanted to talk about the hang, and I think we have to talk about the immersive element.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: I know that was really important for me to have an undulating hang consistent throughout the run. I did that, as you know, in Barbican. I wanted the gradation throughout the walls to mirror the striations in the pictures. It had to be black and white, obviously because that's the chroma of the work: gray to black and white. And the hang felt like that because that's, in my head That's how it flowed. I kept thinking about jazz, you know, like I saw like Coltrane: This is what happens when you go on a rabbit hole. And like, you know, and like you just see the notes and you're like, this is crazy. I think it was Giant Steps or something. And I'm just like, what is the, you know, anyways. Uh, long story short was that I really love the flow of it. I like an undulating hang. I like hangs that aren't super linear. Um, I like things to feel a little uneven because then it makes you pay attention more. I think. And it's much more interesting experience to walk through or, you know, to, to, to enter and to leave. There's always this expectation you have that everything has to be presented in a certain way for you. And what this, I hope, is inspires more engagement, more interaction. Um, and it's all of it. It’s in the sound that Peter composed It’s all of that is in there. And it was all heavily, heavily considered. From the very first proposal I did a Barbican. This is the same proposal is here. And I'm very proud of that. I'm very happy that we stayed consistent with what I envisioned, but it was, you know, it was very like new, you know. It wasn't something that I had done before.

Erin J. Gilbert: Well and it's absolutely cinematic. So that notion of the cinematic brings us to this kind of notion of this screen and this feeling of the kind of changing screen, um, that I do believe the gradations give us alongside that immersive sound installation.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: It's like a pulsating, you know, it's like this feeling of -

Erin J. Gilbert: Absolutely, it moves you through, and then it stops you and you have time with certain works and you experience them. And the works themselves get the rhythm that the music has, so you start to kind of engage with the rocks and the landscapes and the figures and those curves in the same way that you do the kind of, not necessarily melodies and harmonies, but the syncopation of the rhythms that I think, you know, Peter provided within the context of the installation. So more than anything else, I think this is a commendation of your vision and of your true commitment, not just to storytelling, but to giving your audiences an experience that is beyond simply engaging with the work in a way that they can walk away from unchanged. I think everyone who's seen the show globally has been changed by it and has been changed not just by this notion of having seen works that are a part of an ancient lineage presented not just, you know, in Europe, but here. And that they will walk away thinking to themselves how they are both implicated in the past and how they are implicated in the change in the present moment. And so again.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: And there are Black people in the future.

Erin J. Gilbert: The Afro-Futuristic future. Thank you so much Toyin. I appreciate you.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: I really appreciate this. Thank you.