

Zoë Hopkins, "Precious Okoyomon Envelops Us in the Textures of Black Mourning," *Hyperallergic*, April 28, 2021

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### Precious Okoyomon Envelops Us in the Textures of Black Mourning

With their installation at Performance Space New York, the artist and poet enables a sense of communion amid unrelenting loss.

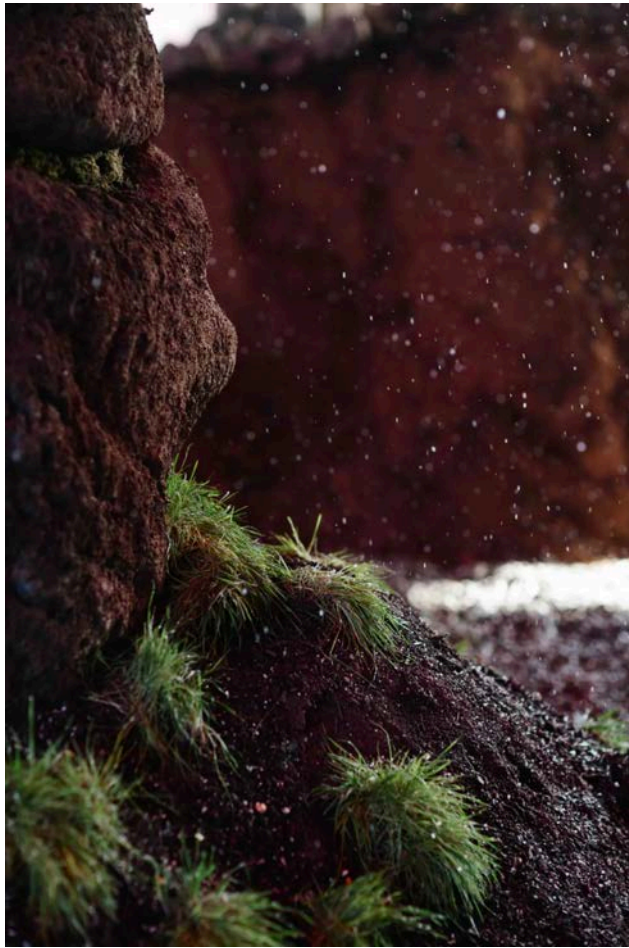
 Zoë Hopkins April 28, 2021



Installation view, *Precious Okoyomon: FRAGMENTED BODY PERCEPTIONS AS HIGHER VIBRATION FREQUENCIES TO GOD*, Performance Space New York, 2021 (all images courtesy Performance Space New York; photo by Da Ping Luo)

Precious Okoyomon has transformed the Keith Haring Theatre at Performance Space into a church of biotic poetry. Responding to the vast and unremitting loss that conditions Black life, their richly symbolic installation is a communion among rocks, soil, and plants that bathes visitors in the possibility of healing. After a year in which the pace of loss has seemingly moved faster than time itself, Okoyomon's installation "FRAGMENTED BODY PERCEPTIONS AS HIGHER VIBRATION FREQUENCIES TO GOD" invites us to linger in the slowness and

fullness of grief. This condition of mourning, though, is not reducible to sheer melancholy: instead our encounter with it is guided by the touch of resplendent life.



Installation view, *Precious Okoyomon: FRAGMENTED BODY PERCEPTIONS AS HIGHER VIBRATION FREQUENCIES TO GOD*, Performance Space New York, 2021 (photo by Da Ping Luo)

Upon entering the installation, visitors are greeted by a symphony of textures that call upon us to inhabit them. Gravel crunches underfoot as we move between stoic rock structures that punctuate the space. A haunting soundscape washes the gallery in the sounds of the ocean and the wind; alongside it, the low murmur of a stream as it trickles across the room suggests rituals of cleansing or rebirth. Wet ash falls from the ceiling like snow, nurturing the moss and soil below. The ash is made from incinerated kudzu, a plant that was deployed in the decades following slavery to protect Southern land from the soil erosion caused by cotton planting. Like the ashes of the deceased scattered in the soil, water, and air, the kudzu melts into our surroundings, joining an unending burial ritual that cycles between past and present, between slavery and its afterlives. Wrapped in the textures of Okoyomon's installation, I am reminded that "the weather is the totality of

our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is anti-Black," as Christina Sharpe writes.

The sensorial immersion that sustains Okoyomon's installation is heavy with the climate that Sharpe names, yet simultaneously, it offers a curative futurity. Nascent life spills out from soil, budding plants, and insects that cover the gallery. *Weather Report*, a poem by Okoyomon that accompanies the exhibition (an allusion, perhaps, to Sharpe's theorizations) is suffused with the same sense of possibility. "IN THIS WORLD I AM A SHAPESHIFTER" they write, "like we gotta make a new world." Much like these poetics, Okoyomon's ecosystem is amorphous: at once on the edge of a new world and shot through with the ancestral. It invites us to be in flux between multiple temporalities, to revel in the sacredness of being where future life mingles with ghosts.





Installation view, *Precious Okoyomon: FRAGMENTED BODY PERCEPTIONS AS HIGHER VIBRATION FREQUENCIES TO GOD*, Performance Space New York, 2021 (photo by Da Ping Luo)

Though it breathes with serenity, Okoyomon's installation is more than a sanctuary or retreat from the vast loss precipitated by anti-Blackness. Rather, it beckons us to sit in and tend to this vastness, to approach the central vexation of Black temporality: what does it mean to heal from something while still being in it? When this tension so often feels paralyzing, Okoyomon reveals it to be full of life-giving potentiality. After all, for Black people, the work of mourning our dead has always been entangled with the work of speculation and dreaming of liberatory futures.

**Precious Okoyomon: FRAGMENTED BODY PERCEPTIONS AS HIGHER VIBRATION FREQUENCIES TO GOD** *continues through May 9 at Performance Space New York.*