

Sarah Cascone, "Artist Precious Okoyomon Invited a Cast of Creative Friends to Recreate the Tower of Babel Inside the Shed for Frieze New York," *Artnet*, May 5, 2021

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Artist Precious Okoyomon Invited a Cast of Creative Friends to Recreate the Tower of Babel Inside the Shed for Frieze New York

Video of the performance can be watched online.



Precious Okoyomon. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

Sarah Cascone May 5, 2021

New York's [Frieze Art Fair](https://www.frieze.com/fairs/frieze-new-york) (<https://www.frieze.com/fairs/frieze-new-york>) opens today, but the prestigious [Frieze Artist Award commission](https://news.artnet.com/market/precious-okoyomon-frieze-award-2021-1946747) (<https://news.artnet.com/market/precious-okoyomon-frieze-award-2021-1946747>), a performance featuring artist and poet Precious Okoyomon, has already come and gone, staged quietly last week before a small, socially distanced crowd.

When art collectors descend on the Shed for the city's first in-person art fair since March 2020, they will only be able to experience *This God Is a Slow Recovery* (2021) in video form, playing at the fair and streaming online.

A cacophony of sound and music, the piece saw Okoyomon and other performers perched on black platforms decorated with silver and camouflage netting in the center of the Shed's performance hall. A collaboration with Los Angeles-based industrial designer [Jonathan Olivares](https://www.jonathanolivares.com/) (<https://www.jonathanolivares.com/>), the set was meant to recall the collapse of the Tower of Babel, encircled with branches, leaves, and a scattering of yellow flowers.

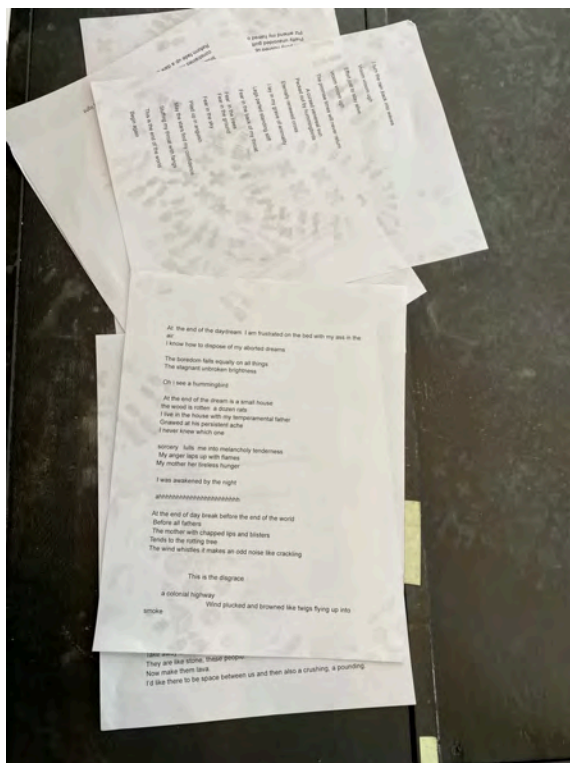
"It's like it's falling and the language is breaking out with it," Okoyomon told Artnet News. "We wanted the towers covered in this kind of reflective material so you get the sky coming back at you. I just wanted to give that towering feel."



Precious Okoyomon, *This God Is a Slow Recovery*, Frieze Artist Award supported by the Luma Foundation, Frieze New York 2021. Photo by Da Ping Luo, courtesy of Frieze.

The performance aimed to evoke the incomprehensibility at the core of the biblical story, which offers an explanation as to why humans speak so many different languages and recounts how language barriers prevent humanity from working together.

As Okoyomon read from their poem "Skysong," leaving sheets of computer paper scattered beneath their feet, the poet's words were frequently drowned out by those of other performers. Friends of Okoyomon, including Eileen Myles, Adjua Gargi, Nzinga Greaves, Dean Kissick, Diamond Stingily, and Ben Fama, read texts of their choice, including favorite books, their own poems, and other work by Okoyomon.

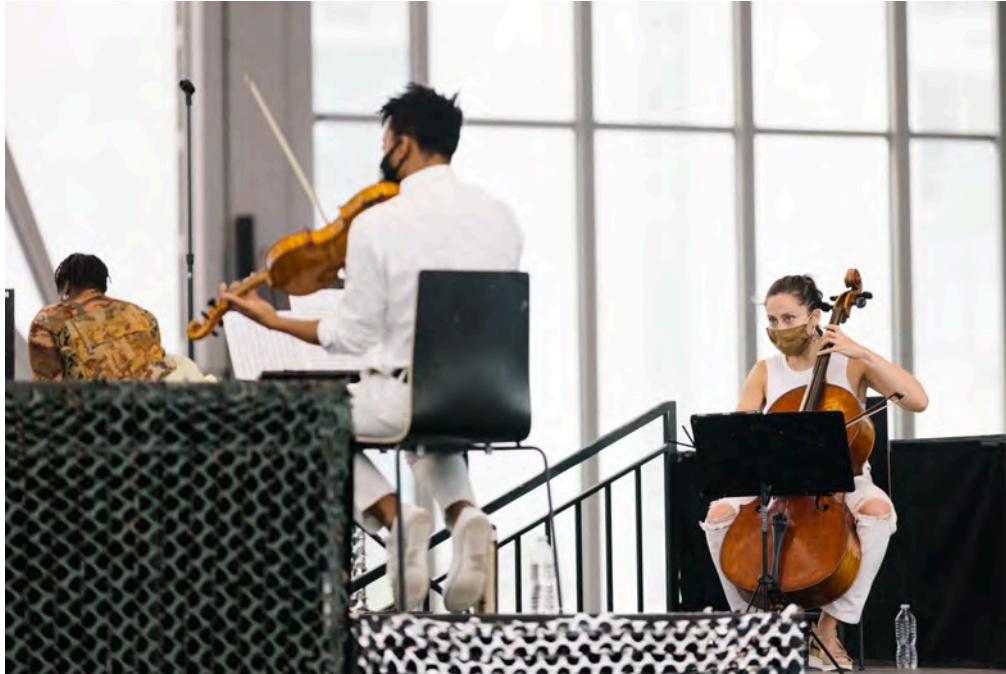


Pages from Precious Okoyomon's poem "Skysong," for the piece *This God Is a Slow Recovery*, Frieze Artist Award supported by the Luma Foundation, Frieze New York 2021. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

"Ben started reading his own poems intertwined with a poem I wrote him several years ago," Okoyomon said, describing it as a "wow" moment. "It's like an intersection of all these woven love songs."

The competing voices clashed, but at different times during the piece, individual voices—often Okoyomon's—rang out over the chaos: "Looking for f*ckable orifices," "the world is dying," and then, repeated, "we do not have to be afraid."

The performers were also competing with a string trio playing *Quartet for the End of Time*, a 1941 composition from French composer Olivier Messiaen.



Precious Okoyomon, *This God Is a Slow Recovery*, Frieze Artist Award supported by the Luma Foundation, Frieze New York 2021. Photo by Da Ping Luo, courtesy of Frieze.

"There were points where you could hear things that weaved in and out with the music. And sometimes you'd only hear me. So that was just what I was hoping," Okoyomon said. "I wanted, like, the fragmented bits. Just be like, completely randomized."

The piece was performed three times, and it was different each time. Okoyomon had to have total trust in the other poets.

"I don't know what's gonna happen," Okoyomon said. "But my poem was the heartbeat, and everyone was adding to that."

Conceived during the pandemic, *This God Is A Slow Recovery* is a response to the isolation of lockdown, being stuck alone in a New York City apartment.



Precious Okoyomon, *This God Is a Slow Recovery*, Frieze Artist Award supported by the Luma Foundation, Frieze New York 2021. Photo by Da Ping Luo, courtesy of Frieze.

"Think about all the times you hear like muted conversations in the places that you move in and out of... I always hear one-liners from people walking around. I really missed that last year," Okoyomon said.

The dark mood of 2020 also permeates the ascendant British artist's current solo show, "[Fragmented Body Perceptions as Higher Vibration Frequencies to God](https://performancespacenewyork.org/shows/fragmented-body-perceptions-as-higher-vibration-frequencies-to-god/) (<https://performancespacenewyork.org/shows/fragmented-body-perceptions-as-higher-vibration-frequencies-to-god/>)," on view at Performance Space New York on the Lower East Side through May 9.

There, Okoyomon has created an apocalyptic installation with the burnt remains of kudzu vines, an invasive plant brought to the American South from Japan, grown for their show at the MMK in Frankfurt, which closed during lockdown.

But from grief, Okoyomon sees a way forward. The layered poetry of *This God Is A Slow Recovery* represents a new kind of language that has developed as society struggles to return to normal—to relearn social skills and the quiet nuance of in-person conversation, with all its nonverbal cues.

"if everyone's worlds mush together," Okoyomon said, "I want that pillar of love so we can hear each other a little better."

See more photos of the performance below.



Precious Okoyomon, *This God Is a Slow Recovery*, Frieze Artist Award supported by the Luma Foundation, Frieze New York 2021. Photo by Da Ping Luo, courtesy of Frieze.



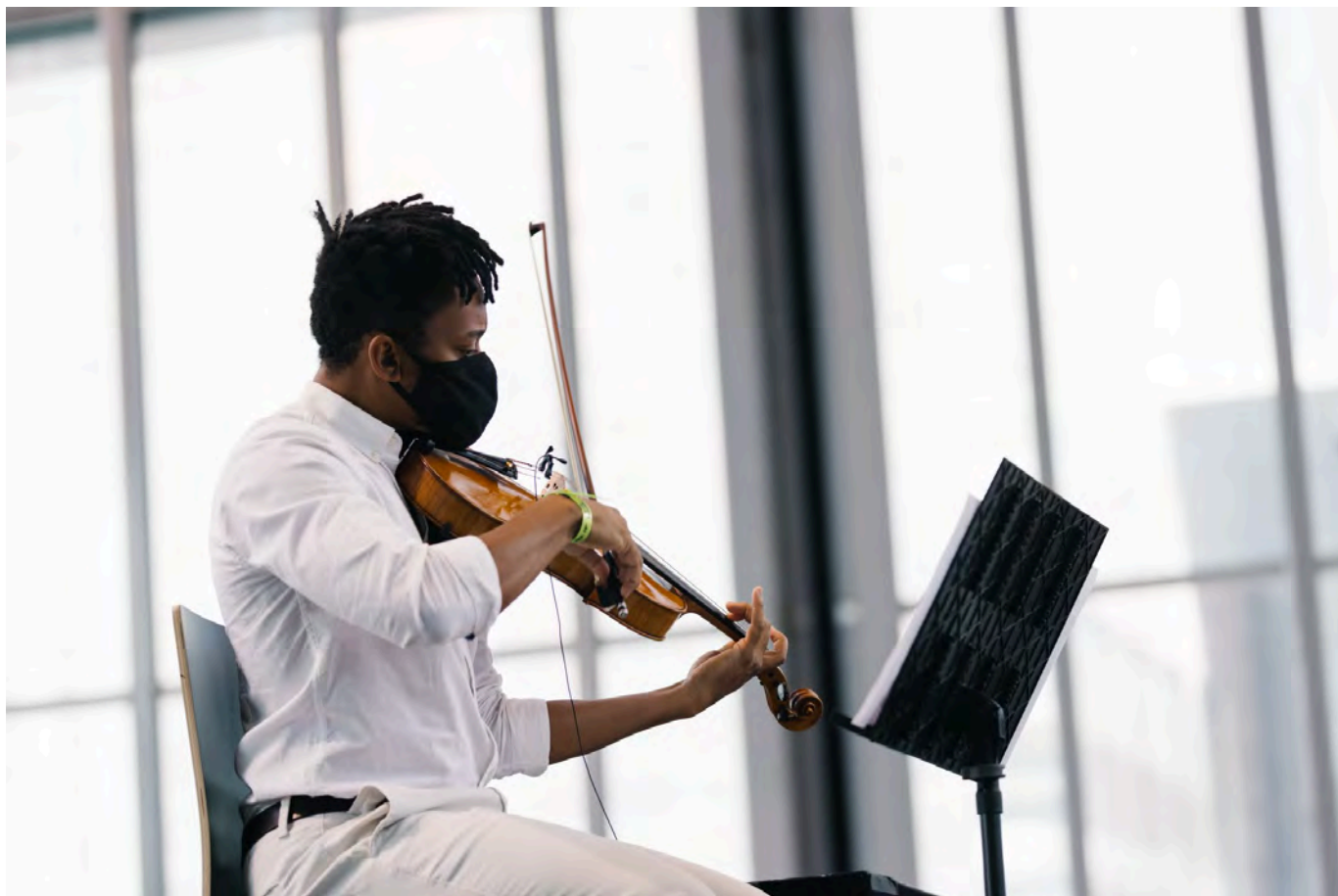
Precious Okoyomon, *This God Is a Slow Recovery*, Frieze Artist Award supported by the Luma Foundation, Frieze New York 2021. Photo by Da Ping Luo, courtesy of Frieze.



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Precious Okoyomon's This God Is a Slow Recovery (<https://www.frieze.com/event/frieze-artist-award-precious-okoyomon>) is on view as part of Frieze New York at the Shed, 545 West 30th Street, New York, May 5–May 9, 2021.

"Precious Okoyomon: Fragmented Body Perceptions as Higher Vibration Frequencies to God" is on view at Performance Space New York, 150 First Avenue, Fourth Floor, New York, March 20–May 9, 2021.