

# Precious Okoyomon installs rooftop utopia at Aspen Art Museum

Installation opens Friday, will run through September 2022

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Andrew Travers



Precious Okoyomon stands in the sunlight in the doorway of the Anderson Ranch ceramics building in Snowmass on Thursday, May 13, 2021. Okoyomon is working on a large installation of the roof of the Aspen Art Museum that will be designed as a interactive nature escape. (Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times)

An encounter with a high alpine dandelion last summer proved to be a breakthrough moment for the artist Precious Okoyomon as they were planning an immersive installation for the rooftop sculpture garden at the Aspen Art Museum.

The Nigerian-American artist and poet, who has drawn international art world attention for recent groundbreaking work with plantlife, will open the hotly anticipated installation on Friday.

A combination of gardens, algae water, edible fruit and plantlife, ceramic sculpture and sound works titled "Every Earthly Morning the Sky's Light touches Ur Life is Unprecedented in its Beauty," it will be in place — in evolving and replenishing forms — through September 2022.

Exploring mountain plantlife here last summer to prepare for the installation, Okoyomon grew particularly fond of the unusually tall invasive local dandelions whose pappus doesn't blow off. Okoyomon recalled blowing one for five minutes without a bit of fluff budging, then trying to shake it in the wind, growing exasperated and then deeply inspired by it.

"I love it," Okoyomon said with a laugh in mid-May during a residency at Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village, where they made all of the ceramics for the installation. "The dandelion actually became one of the inspirations for this resilient unbreakable garden."





Precious Okoyomon's shows ceramic work for their big installation on the Aspen Art Museum rooftop while working in the Anderson Ranch ceramics studio in Snowmass on Thursday, May 13, 2021. (Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times)

Embracing this kind of plantlife, rather than the manicured and idealized creations one might think of a landscape artist pursuing, became the driving force of the installation which will cross-pollinate indigenous and invasive species.

"That was an a-ha moment," Okoyomon, 28, recalled. "Like, 'I really want to make a space for all the indestructible things that people see as undesirable.'"

Okoyomon's Aspen opening comes on the heels of winning the 2021 Frieze Artist Award and doing a performance piece, "This God is a Slow Recovery," at Frieze New York as well as opening an acclaimed installation that included streams, fish, bugs and wildflowers at Performance Space New York this spring.

On a May morning in an Anderson Ranch studio, Okoyomon was surrounded by ceramic tiles fired in the Ranch kilns to be placed on pathways around the garden installation, some with fragmentary poems written on them, many with cheerful flower drawings etched and glazed in them.





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Okoyomon was also at work on sketches for an eight-foot tall “angel protector” sculpture with a bird's nest in its chest, 60 smaller concrete angels (on which moss was expected to grow) and was planning 3-D printed pieces to be made in the Ranch's fabrication lab. Earlier in the day, Okoyomon had met with a jazz musician helping to craft the installation's interactive soundscape. The artist this month has been making sound recordings around Aspen with musicians.

“The garden is basically a giant soundboard,” Okoyomon explained. “Everything will be motion-sensored. So as you walk past, the music is going to be constant.”

All of these intricate parts are intended to create an abundant dreamworld for museum visitors to find what they need in it.

IF YOU GO ...

**What:** Precious Okoyomon's 'Every Earthly Morning the Sky's Light touches Ur Life is Unprecedented in its Beauty'

**Where:** Aspen Art Museum rooftop sculpture garden

**When:** June 11 through Sept. 18, 2022

**How much:** Free

**More info:** Also opening Friday is Cerith Wyn Evans' 'Aspen Drift;' [aspenartmuseum.org](http://aspenartmuseum.org)

“I create the spaces but I don't want to give you the experience,” Okoyomon explained. “I want you to come in there and decide what you want to do in there for yourself. I just hope I can create a space where you feel safe, a little fragilized from the world, and feel rested —like a small escape from the actual stress and anxiety of the world.”

Okoyomon's collaborators are many on the Aspen work, among them museum curator-at-large Claude Adjil — who has functioned as a sort of project manager for this massive undertaking — and local birds, butterflies and wildlife.

“I'm excited to draw all of the wildlife to the garden — like hummingbird mania,” Okoyomon said.

“I’m really excited about the honeysuckle,” Okoyomon said. “I’m obsessed with the smell of honeysuckle. It’s just going to be yummy and inviting, like, ‘Please come forage for fruit!’”

Literally come forage for fruit? Yes. Okoyomon hopes visitors will bring baskets and eat the installation. The museum is also planning regular public events, musical performances and kids’ education opportunities for the installation. Okoyomon is bringing friends from several sectors in the arts to activate the installation with performances and gatherings over the next 15 months, including public services on the solstices and a summer 2022 poetry retreat.

The gardens promise to be a hub of Aspen’s arts scene as it emerges into a post-vaccine summer, the COVID-19 pandemic wanes here with public health restrictions loosened. Okoyomon may be an ideal maestro for this moment. The artist’s groundbreaking work includes experiential food-based art, bringing together groups to taste creations from Spiral Theory Test Kitchen.

The installation is also emblematic of the spirit of collaboration that appears to be a product of the pandemic for local arts institutions —bringing together Anderson Ranch and the museum to foster Okoyomon’s local work.

After this weekend’s opening Okoyomon will head home to Brooklyn, but will return in August to remake the gardens into their next iteration. Learning about how to create abundance in the forbidding high alpine climate has been fun, Okoyomon said, working with naturalists from the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies and with local growers. Come winter, Okoyomon expects to embrace snowmelt to keep the garden going.

“It’s going to be mostly black flowers,” Okoyomon said. “It’s going to change from this beautiful, powerful edible environment into this garden of vines and creepy little resilient flowers. A lot of things aren’t dead in the winter. They just go dormant.”

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