

Ayanna Dozier, "Precious Okoyomon Ushers Dirt, Blood, and Butterflies into the Venice Biennale," *Artsy*, April 21, 2022

ARTSY

Precious Okoyomon Ushers Dirt, Blood, and Butterflies into the Venice Biennale

Ayanna Dozier



Precious Okoyomon, installation view of *To See The Earth Before the End of the World, 2022*, at the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, “The Milk of Dreams,” in April 2022. Photo by Roberto Marossi. Courtesy of the artist and La Biennale di Venezia.

Precious Okoyomon marries nature with poetry in immersive landscape installations. Their alchemical approach to artmaking concocts environments that convey narratives of social freedom through a variety of organic materials. Taking a cue from poet Edward Glissant’s proclamation that the sciences are half-starved without poetry, Okoyomon examines the social construction of the human in relation to living and nonliving things.

Okoyomon has been on the rise over the last two years following a series of acclaimed solo exhibitions at Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, the Aspen Art Museum in Colorado, and Performance Space in New York. In 2021, they were named the recipient of the Frieze Artist Award, and now, Okoyomon is one of 200 artists included in the main exhibition at the 59th edition of the Venice Biennale, “The Milk of Dreams,” curated by Cecilia Alemani.



Precious Okoyomon, installation view of *Efua, The Sun is my Own Darkness Swallowed in Flames, 2022*, at the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, “The Milk of Dreams,” in July 2022. Photo by Clelia Cadamuro. Courtesy of the artist and Quinn Harrelson Gallery.



Precious Okoyomon, installation view of *To See The Earth Before the End of the World, 2022*, at the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, “The Milk of Dreams,” in April 2022. Photo by Roberto Marossi. Courtesy of the artist and La Biennale di Venezia.

This year's exhibition traces the collision between the perceived ending of the natural world with theories of emancipation through technology and poetry. Okoyomon's installation *To See the Earth Before the End of the World (2022)* makes visible Alemanni's studied framing of human and environmental metamorphosis. *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* is an evolving work that unearths new narratives for reconfiguring the human beyond Western consciousness and in support of Black life and its futures.

“I. have. been installing like. a mad person covered in dirt [sic],” Okoyomon wrote in an email to Artsy on the eve of their installation opening. One foot into the dirt-filled space confirms Okoyomon's state of being over the past week. Featuring a musical composition by frequent collaborator Gio Escobar of *Standing in the Corner*, the gallery is staged as a complex water garden with paved walkways and various large pebble stones that act as bridges over water and dirt-sodden enclosures.



To See the Earth Before the End of the World uses a variety of organic materials—including butterflies, invasive plant species, raw wool, dirt, and blood—to create and animate life-size sculptures of unknown beings. Deliberately abstract in their representation, these dirt- and blood-encrusted molded forms could be deities, ancestors, or even more ambitious, our future selves. The ambiguity as to what they are allows audiences to become storytellers alongside the work and the artist.

The installation is inspired by Glissant's 1961 play *Monsieur Toussaint*, which tells the life of the leader of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture, and of colonialization's effect on the human body and the natural resources of the Caribbean. Okoyomon's installation uses sugarcane to draw out Glissant's correlation between the extrapolation of natural resources and of enslaved labor via the plantation. The artist further adds to Glissant's conceptual work by planting in the gallery the invasive Japanese vine kudzu, which they have incorporated in several of their previous installations.



The use of kudzu creates a compelling dialogue around survival and the relationship between humans and the natural world. While the term “invasive species” is frequently framed around intrusion, Okoyomon’s rich conceptual framework unveils that invasive species are often forcibly displaced and subsequently trying to survive in a hostile climate.

The smallest detail of *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* is also its most dazzling: the inclusion of black swallowtail butterflies that will live, reproduce, and die inside of the exhibition space over the course of the Biennale. Included as part of the main installation, the butterflies are also a standalone work. Titled *The Sky Is Always Black Fort Mose* (2022), it references an 18th-century settlement of formerly enslaved Black people who escaped the American South to live in the then-Spanish colony Fort Mose in present-day Florida. Here, Okoyomon creates a beautiful parallel through migration rather than species, where the constant flight of the butterflies throughout the Biennale mirrors the flight of the Black diaspora fleeing captivity. The metaphor extends beyond the period of slavery to trace the constant movement of Black people escaping various forms of systemic oppression.



Precious Okoyomon, detail of *Efua, The Sun is my Own Darkness Swallowed in Flames*, 2022, at the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, “The Milk of Dreams,” in July 2022. Photo by Clelia Cadamuro. Courtesy of the artist and Quinn Harrelson Gallery.



Precious Okoyomon, detail of *To See The Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022, at the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, “The Milk of Dreams,” in July 2022. Photo by Clelia Cadamuro. Courtesy of the artist and Quinn Harrelson Gallery.

“I guess the entire work is about the Blackness of the earth. But a lot of times when I look at that, Blackness, in my work, I am looking at the actual entanglement of the social fiction of race with living and nonliving things,” Okoyomon said. “But with the butterflies, it’s something almost different. It’s just their flight, their beautiful flight, constant. This is Blackness as the earth.”

Okoyomon’s varied interests inform their artistic approach to narrating the human outside of Western consciousness. These sources include *Outkast*, Katherine McKittrick’s edited volume of scholarly essays on Sylvia Wynter and 2021 book *Dear Science and Other Stories*, James Baldwin’s *Jimmy’s Blues and Other Poems* (2014), and, as Okoyomon described, “nerdy animes” about classical pianists (*The Perfect World of Kai*). For Okoyomon, the human, like our environment, is in a state of emergency that needs all the intervention it can receive from both science and poetry.

“I want a new ontology,” the artist said. “Blackness is the non moving earth and the human has nothing left for us, the human can only reproduce the same thing it always already has. We need a new modality of being.” Such new modalities, as Okoyomon’s work shows, may provide us with new visions of the future through narrative and nature.