

# GLADSTONE

Linda Yablonsky, "Poisonous plants and an animatronic bear: Precious Okoyomon fills Roman chapel with a garden of unearthly delights," *The Art Newspaper*, June 28, 2023



## Poisonous plants and an animatronic bear: Precious Okoyomon fills Roman chapel with a garden of unearthly delights

The New York-based artist's ability to balance the horrifying with the restorative reaches a mad-genius peak at Sant'Andrea de Scaphis



Installation view of Precious Okoyomon: the sun eats her children, Sant' Andrea de Scaphis, Rome

Courtesy of Sant'Andrea de Scaphis



It's alive! It's alive! Not Dr. Frankenstein's fiend, but another endearing monster born of human intervention in the natural world. This one is an animatronic stuffed bear, whose brown fur could use a comb-out. It wears its white lace panties like a diaper, head bandaged with an outsized white bow. Tipping the scales at 85lbs, it would stand around a metre tall, were it not lying on its side in the underbrush of a dense, aromatic garden as if in a post-coital swoon, or ravaged by a predator, or simply overcome by intoxicating scents. Possibly all three.

Named for the haunting title character of Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, the semi-conscious bear is the central sculptural element of the sun eats her children—a living, permacultural environment by Precious Okoyomon that is as threatening as it is fertile.

Those opposing dynamics were part of what made the New York-based, Nigerian-American artist's contribution of a kudzu and sugar cane fortress, I mean forest, a highlight of Cecilia Alemani's central exhibition of the 2022 Venice Biennale. Okoyomon's installation was also an act of resistance—against racism, colonialism, and any other restricting power that is its own worst enemy as well as ours.



Installation view of Precious Okoyomon: the sun eats her children, Sant' Andrea de Scaphis, Rome

Courtesy of Sant'Andrea de Scaphis



Okoyomon's balance of the horrifying and the comical, the evil and the restorative, reaches a mad-genius peak in the gallery at Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, a deconsecrated ninth-century Roman chapel. Since 2015, when the dealer Gavin Brown took over the long-abandoned oratory, it has functioned as an exceptional space for exhibitions by contemporary artists, including Joan Jonas, Arthur Jafa and the late Jannis Kounellis

Though just 29, the singular Okoyomon belongs in their company. "I've always played with soil and plants," Okoyomon told me during their show's installation. There is plenty of both in the church, now an LED-lit hothouse with gravel pathways and black butterflies that open sky-blue wings to dance like Tinkerbells through the 10m-high space, which fills with heavenly symphonic music by Kelsey Lu.

Among other sound effects, the extended scream that rents the air every ten minutes to wake Beloved from her slumber is bloodcurdling enough to make Edvard Munch sit up in his grave. Okoyomon, who often works with collaborators, recorded the scream by blending their own voice with those of the choreographer-performer Okwui Okpokwasili and the influential Black writer and scholar Saidiya Hartman.

A sense of the positive grows with the jasmine climbing the seasoned walls of the church, where a fragrant mix of tall lilies, honeysuckle, white dogwood, red roses and other greenery baptise viewers with fragrances that counter the environment's dark underbelly.

"I wanted a lot of poisonous plants," the artist declared. They didn't say that out of spite; the butterflies eat the poison, drop eggs, and when they die give birth to succeeding generations that fly free. By the exhibition's closing in September, all of the plants' deliberately unchecked growth will become a jungle of competing wills, each expressing the freedom to be themselves in a different yet communal way.

Gardens have long supplied artists and writers with all kinds of metaphors. Okoyomon makes use of their botanicals for effective commentary on Black bodies, submissiveness, power, migration, molestation, playfulness, decay, difference and family relations that I found both dizzying and unique.



Precious Okoyomon (right) and Kelsey Lu (left) at Sant' Andrea de Scaphis, Rome

Born in London to Nigerian parents, Okoyomon lived in Lagos until before decamping with their mother to the American Midwest. In Chicago, Okoyomon studied pataphysics and child psychology while cooking in one of the city's top restaurants. Okoyomon then moved to New York and volunteered at A community garden, but from the start identified primarily as a poet.

It was poetry that brought Okoyomon into the art world. That was in 2017, when Hans Ulrich Obrist read their first published volume and invited Okoyomon's participation in an evening of readings at the Serpentine Gallery. A year later, Okoyomon went back to perform a new play, an epic poem starring four baby lambs and four Black angels. At Art Basel a short time later, Obrist moderated a conversation between Okoyomon and Rirkrit Tiravanija, for whom cooking is a central tenet of his art.

Okoyomon also met Brown, Tiravanija's dealer. It's all connected.

Interestingly, the artist had never has been on any gallery's roster—another form of resistance. That has not gotten in the way of their cascading institutional solo shows: MMK in Frankfurt (2020), Performance Space New York (2021) and the Aspen Art Museum (2021-22). In 2021, Okoyomon won both the Frieze New York artist award and the Chanel Next Prize. Their current show in Rome is their first in a (nominally) commercial space.

A career as a visual artist was not Okoyomon's intention when starting out as a writer. "I didn't have a plan," they said. "But somehow I always knew that my words would guide me."

· Precious Okoyomon: the sun eats her children, Sant' Andrea de Scaphis, Rome, until 16 September