

GLADSTONE

Mercedes Ezquiaga, "Precious Okoyomon in Madrid: a forest hidden inside an artificial mountain," *StirWorld*, March 26, 2024

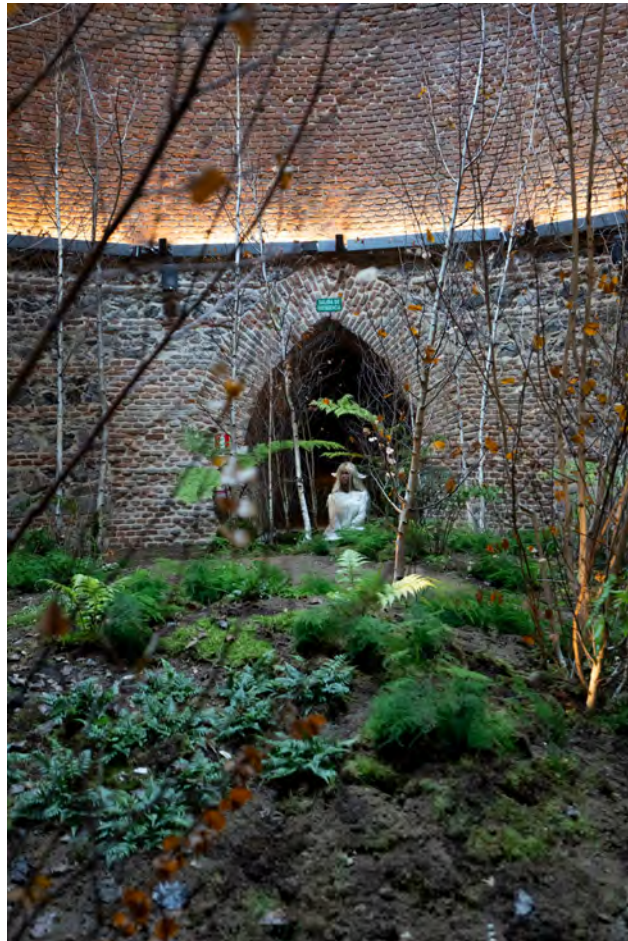


Precious Okoyomon in Madrid: a forest hidden inside an artificial mountain

The first exhibition of the Nigerian artist in Spain, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, can be visited at the Montaña Artificial, a former space for royalty.

by Mercedes Ezquiaga | Published on : Mar 26, 2024

The Russian pianist Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915), considered one of the greatest exponents of post-Romanticism, was one of the most innovative composers in the history of music. His dream, which went unrealised, was to create a total work of art (Gesamtkunstwerk), an extraordinary opera that would include all artistic disciplines—performance, poetry, music, chorus, orchestra—and would take place in a spherical temple at the foot of the Himalaya Mountains. The piece, designed to incorporate sound, smell and touch, was to last 10 days and symbolise the end of the world. In the end, according to its author, humanity would be made up of 'nobler beings'. However, after spending 15 years working on it, he died and his work was left unfinished. More than a hundred years later, the queer artist of Nigerian origin, Precious Okoyomon has taken up this idea; using the texts of the poet Anne Boyer as inspiration, they presented their envisioning of the end of the world in their first exhibition in Spain, *When the Lambs Rise Up Against the Bird of Prey* supported by Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Madrid Foundation and Madrid City Council.



When the Lambs Rise Up Against the Bird of Prey, 2024, the first exhibition by Precious Okoyomon in Spain
Image: © Benedetta Mascalchi; Courtesy of Fundación Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Madrid

Curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, the setting is special: the Montaña Artificial, also known as the Montaña de los gatos ("Cat's Mountain" as the people of Madrid are popularly referred to as cats), is a place that was abandoned and closed for 20 years. It was on a whim that King Fernando VII ordered it to be built in the 19th century as a creative and recreational space in El Retiro Park. After passing through the entrance gate, a narrow, brick-walled corridor leads to the centre of a domed, conical, mountain-like construction.



When the Lambs Rise Up Against the Bird of Prey is on view till April 3, 2024,
Precious Okoyomon
Image: © Benedetta Mascalchi; Courtesy of Fundación Sandretto Re Rebaudengo
Madrid

Okoyomon's installation draws viewers into a disturbing forest set inside this hollow mountain. Paths, carved through the trees, are enveloped in an atmosphere of sounds and a strange aroma, like incense, which rises from the earth. The forest hides among its lush vegetation an animatronic figure, a sort of animal-woman, kneeling on the grass, dressed in white, representing a lamb. Her body moves parsimoniously, like an automaton and her gaze is like a pendulum, changing focus in an unsettling way, giving the impression that her eyes are staring at the spectator. All this takes place inside a circular construction within the vaulted galleries, a space that was initially conceived as a place of invention and fable, where the King tried to generate an idyllic universe between the real world and the world beyond. A spirit that Okoyomon somehow recovers with their artistic piece.



Precious Okoyomon has recreated an artificial forest with an animatronic lamb hiding among its vegetation, 2024

Image: © Benedetta Mascalchi; Courtesy of Fundación Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Madrid

"This installation revolves around the figure of the lamb as a paradoxical symbol of suffering and triumph. The interpretation of Okoyomon opposes the traditional idea of the lamb as a candid, gentle and vulnerable being, showing it, on the contrary, as an intuitive and wise creature, with the ability to survive predators and apocalyptic scenarios," said Obrist during the opening presentation.



Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Founder and President of Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist at the exhibition When the Lambs Rise Up Against the Bird of Prey, 2024
Image: © Benedetta Mascali; Courtesy of Fundación Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

Okoyomon imagines the lamb in a vision that is reminiscent of Scriabin's unfinished work, *Mysterium*, but which in turn takes its inspiration from Boyer's poetry. The music accompanying this multidisciplinary creation is based on notes and fragments of the utopian and unfinished *Mysterium* by Alexander Scriabin, based on poems by Okoyomon and arranged by the composer Juan Manuel Artero.

Okoyomon, like Scriabin, combines sounds, aromas and images "in a kind of endless ode that echoes continuously throughout the space," in which they present "their own version of the end of the world," Obrist adds.

At the time of the formal presentations, Okoyomon, who won the Frieze Artist Award in 2021 and whose work will be part of *Nigeria Imaginary*, a group exhibition at the Nigerian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2024, preferred to read one of their poems.



Portrait of Precious Okoyomon, 2024

Image: © Benedetta Mascalchi; Courtesy of Fundación Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

"I was afraid of nothing / I was a lamb with fangs and no shepherd / The dream recovers itself from the amnesia of its sorrow / Freeze frame the moment / The world is no place for lambs / It is dark / Something happens in the room / This becomes the grave." The words of Okoyomon—dressed entirely in white, like the lamb—read with gentleness and aplomb contrasting with the apocalyptic climate of the show.

The artist recovered that incomplete 50-page piece by Scriabin and rewrote it in the form of a diary: the diary of a lamb that has rebelled against the bird of prey. "And that is the prayer that sustains the exhibition," Okoyomon said during a conversation with the curator, which is reproduced in the exhibition catalogue.

The exhibition 'Precious Okoyomon: When the Lambs Rise Up Against the Bird of Prey', curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist is on display until April 3, 2024.