

Pablo Larios, "VENICE DIARIES: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE," *Artforum*, April 18, 2024

ARTFORUM

DIARY

VENICE DIARIES: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

By Pablo Larios

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Precious Okoyomon, *Pre-Sky / Emit Light: Yes Like that*, 2024, steel, glass, brass bells, steel wire, plants, soil, dimensions variable. From "Nigeria Imaginary."

“I WANT TO TURN THE VIEWERS INTO FOREIGNERS,” Tesfaye Urgessa says to me. We’re in one of the baroque rooms in Venice’s Palazzo Bollani near San Marco, where, this week, the Addis Ababa-based painter is the first to represent Ethiopia in its debut official Venice pavilion. I tell Urgessa that his new oil paintings—scenes of lost, anxious domesticity, where lean, fragmented bodies flash with bold strips of color on angular sofas and carpets—are outstanding. I’m curious how he arrived at the turbulent imagery and subtle shifts of perspective in the eighteen works, hung across three rooms in the Palazzo. In the work in front of us—a huge, nine-by-thirteen-foot diptych, *Spring or fall*, 2024—forearms and feet poke out from an oblong ring that seems to be filled with heads; boxes resembling dish crates seem to rattle on a counter; a leg appears to melt into a bowl on the floor. What’s that hand, reaching in partly out of frame, scrawling in a notebook? “It’s an invitation for the viewer to write their own story, thereby confronting their own prejudices and judgments,” Urgessa suggests, echoing the title of his exhibition: “Prejudice and Belonging.”

Urgessa, who returned to Addis Ababa after living for many years in Germany, is one among many young African-born or African-diasporic artists who are showing some of the best works in the Sixtieth Venice Biennale’s national sections. Senegal’s first-ever official pavilion, “Bokk–Bounds,” showcased Dakar-born Alioune Diagne’s expertly impressionistic paintings. With their thousands of flat strokes of muted colors, they show faceless people in headscarves, other faces laughing or shouting, in snapshots of everyday urban drama. In the middle of the artist’s exhibit at the Arsenale, Diagne’s sculpture of a boat cracked in two spoke a little too literally on the catastrophe of passage—yet, when paired with the vague imagery of the vast paintings, it conveyed a stark, direct message, as decisive as a cut.

“I’m a poet before I’m an artist,” Precious Okoyomon said on Thursday afternoon, standing in front of her overgrown, sun-washed installation, *Pre-Sky / Emit Light: Yes Like that*, 2024. The sculpture, resembling a radio tower strung up with delicate bells with an orb-like ball at the center, was installed in a half-covered garden in Dorsoduro as part of “Nigeria Imaginary,” the second Nigerian pavilion at the Palazzo Canal. Okoyomon’s radio-like sculpture used a speaker to broadcast a washy stream of ambient recordings, where snips of voices seemed to wilt among the overgrowing garden below, which will morph as it grows and decays through the summer. “I went to Lagos and did Lacanian psychoanalysis on people for ten days,” Okoyomon explained about the genesis of their work. They conducted interviews with Nigerian poets, artists, and regular folks, offering prompts like “describe a morning you woke up without fear” or “who is responsible for the suffering of your mother?” The resultant lines (“people said to me: ‘no one has ever asked me these things’”) are played in a haze. Like Okoyomon, other artists in “Nigeria Imaginary” augment source material from Nigeria with technology. For Fatimah Tuggar’s *Light Cream Pods (Excerpt)*, 2024, installed partly in window-like enclaves, the artist outfitted wooden gourds with animatronics that performed programmed movements and an AR app that added buried context to the works on view. On a wall, a few of them buzzed their wings like dragonflies.



Precious Okoyomon and her dog, Gravity.