

GLADSTONE

Osman Can Yerebakan, "Precious Okoyomon: the sun eats her children," *The Brooklyn Rail*, August 29, 2024



Precious Okoyomon: the sun eats her children

By Osman Can Yerebakan



Installation view: Precious Okoyomon: the sun eats her children, Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, Rome, 2023. © Precious Okoyomon. Courtesy of the artist, Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: Daniele Majoli.

Rome was scorching in July: its cobblestones sizzled like a greasy griddle and the air spewed fiery puffs like an angry god. There was, however, a way to cool off, a few-seconds-long escape from the unforgiving heat: Precious Okoyomon's exhibition, *the sun eats her children*. Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, a deconsecrated ninth century church in Trastevere, was replete with plants in the artist's take-over, and the density of the flora behind a heavily curtained door had raised the heat inside to extremes. Getting back out to the narrow street therefore felt like a spring breeze, just for a handful of moments. Once the shock from the sudden temperature change waned, 103 Fahrenheit felt the way it normally does—I wanted to go back inside.

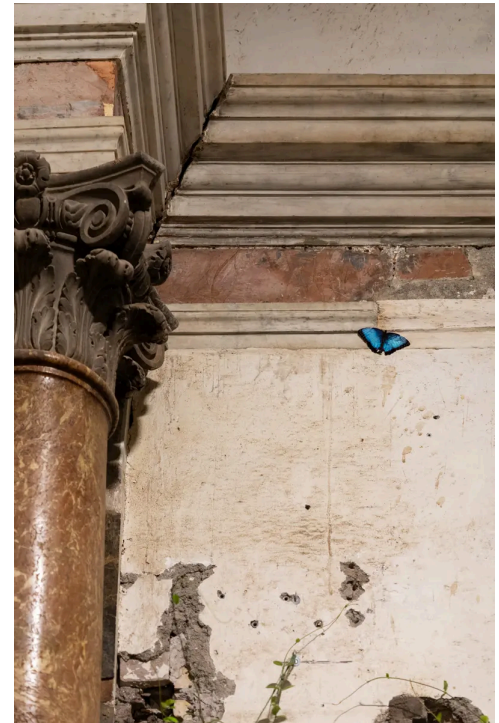
Okoyomon's first solo exhibition with the gallery—a bold one with their choice of an antiquated off-the-beaten-path sanctuary as a venue—has an intense climate, but the experience of suffocation it provokes is not only physical. The heat wave is the initial sensorial blow in the New York-based artist's Roman garden, but it is followed up by the temporary greenhouse's staggering visual abundance and a lingering audio installation, composed by Kelsey Lu. Backdropped by the church's cracked walls and an altar guarded by two marble columns, the garden thrives in its enticing beauty. A blue butterfly glides in search of a sky as little earthy paths snake towards the tired brick walls. The embrace of a deliberate loss of place tempts a visitor to the exhibition, just like the butterfly filling its last few days on earth by hopping from a bitter nightshade leaf to a jimson weed and lantana flower before landing on a spiky stinging nettle leaf. Traversing the plants—which all possess the ability to produce poison—the butterfly roamed a minefield.



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While stuffy air fills our breaths and seeps into our sweating skins, the optical and auditory stimuli push the overpowering wave of sensation forward. Breathless, we look around: shades of green wash the sunless field under a soaring ceiling hundreds of years old; a melody, calm like chamber music but pitched high as the sounds rising from an angsty teenager's bedroom, echoes. The touristic cacophony of Rome feels far away; we could, rather, give in to the garden.

Smaller than Okoyomon's 59th Venice Biennale installation at the Arsenale, the presentation in the Eternal City operates like an echo chamber, not only for the ear but also for the eye and the skin. Beauty—with its allure and dangerous aloofness—is a core in the artist's work in poetry, visual art, and food. Under seedlings of botanical beauty, questions of power grow. A careful gardener, Okoyomon cultivates seeds of belonging, nativity, resistance, and rebellion. The lantana grows like rage; a jimson weed flowers defiance. The vulnerability of budding poisonous foliage may be deceptive, but the brutality of the histories that inform Okoyomon's work is very real. In Venice, Okoyomon's installation was anchored by the stubborn kudzu plant and was soundtracked by subtle sounds of water streaming. Here, they orchestrate a botanical opera, each plant reaching towards the sky like delirious protagonists betrayed by love—or are they coy antagonists silently watching the drama unfurl before them? In fact, we realize eventually that the plants here function as a Greek chorus, the opinionated spectators to Beloved. A stuffed animatronic bear is found lying amidst the green stalks right before the altar, wearing a white ribbon over its head and underwear that combines the silliness of a diaper and the sultriness of lingerie, its pink lips left ajar like those of a sex doll. Asleep, dead, or playing dead, she suddenly opens her cartoonish eyes as if we have disturbed her rest. The oversize teddy bear is deadpan, unimpressed by her surroundings of lush beauty, perhaps even angered by the insistent vegetation. A vengeful Medea, a self-righteous Electra, or perhaps a selfless Antigone, she screeches while her bulging yellow eyes fight fatigue and anger. The mellow melodies of Lu's soundtrack switch to screams voiced by Okoyomon themselves, as well as Saidiya Hartman and Okwui Okpokwasili. Meanwhile, the robotic mammal stays frozen in stillness, a dramatic contrast to the fiery screams now permeating the church. A butterfly dies; we go outside.



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