

Exhibition Review

Akintayo Akintobi

The End of The Beginning

South River Art Studio, 1300 Fleetwood Dr SE,
Atlanta GA; United States of America. (USA).

October 6 to November 3, 2023.

A Ó PARA WA LÁYÒ, OLENLE A Ó PARA WA LÁYÒ, OLENLE

STEPHEN FOLÁRÀNMÍ

Fine Art Department

Rhodes University

South Africa

In his first solo exhibition, Akintayo Akintobi, currently a post graduate student of the Department of “Art and Design, East Tennessee State University, and former student of the prestigious Art institution in Nigeria, Obafemi Awolowo University Oile-Ifè, presents a body of works showcasing his studio practice and experiments over the past 5 years. Titled the End of the Beginning (figure 1), the show is being held at the South River Art Studio, 1300 Fleetwood Dr SE, Atlanta GA; United States of America. (USA). It runs from October 6 to November 3, 2023.

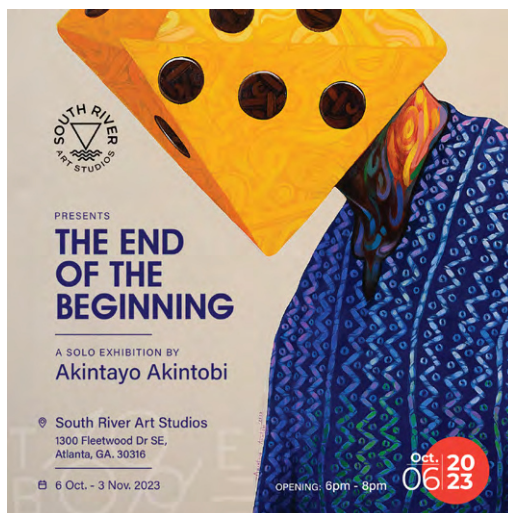


Fig. 1: Exhibition Poster

The Tournay, 2023 (figure 2), one of Akintayo Akintobi's paintings in this first solo exhibition, reflect my title above, derived from a Yorùbá song rendition. This song rendition is usually one of the many play or response songs enacted during the several types of games the Yorùbá people engage in. In the Tournay, the game being played is *ayò ọlọpọ̀n* (board game), which is common in many African cultures with several variations. *Ayò ọlọpọ̀n* is a playful complex, yet relaxing as people mostly engage in it during leisure. This game requires significant mathematical skills, keen observation, and alertness. It is regarded as a 'game of intellectuals', while others, old and young, simply play to pass the time, for competition, and just to let out the steam. Extremely skilful players among the Yorùbá often devote time and energy, playing the game repeatedly to continue learning more about the game's several possibilities. I have witnessed highly skilful players who dash out seeds to opponents at the beginning of a game and still win, a show of their dexterity in this game of numbers and probabilities.



Fig. 2: Akintayo Akintobi, 2023. The Tournay. Acrylic on canvas, 48x60"

Akintobi, like many other artists in the 21st century, have adopted the structures and strategies of games, using it to create personal, societal expressions, social interactions, and peoples' culture through their artworks. In recent years, the digital arts have now taken a new direction in how artists engage with gaming and art. Artists are now deep in engaging with technology for artistic engagement. What is also striking about the Tourney and other paintings in this exhibition is the play or combination of more than one game. We have been served a variety of games by Akintobi. From the dominant Rubik cube, the dice, chess (see figure 3 *Mind Game*), the legos (see figure 4 *Àlàdè and Àbèké*) and ayò ọlópón. Ayò ọlópón, also known as Mancala or Oware, is a sowing, count-and-capture game that originated from the African continent but is played in Asia and many other parts of the world. The version of the game in Nigeria is hand-carved from wood. Twelve circular or sometimes squares holes are carved out of the wooden block (six holes on each side of play) and is played by two people at a time.



Fig. 3: Akintayo Akintobi, 2020. *Mind Game*. Acrylic on canvas, 48x40"



Fig. 4: Akintayo Akintobi, 2021. Àlādè and Àbèké. Acrylic on canvas, 36x36"

Aside *Ilé làbò isinmi oko* (figure 5), which is without any figural representation, all the paintings in this series are portraits of individuals, families, friends, and opponents engaging in one form of activity or another. But in these portraits, Akintobi is less concerned about subjects' facial expressions or physiognomic resemblance. Rather his focus is on the cultural, communal, and game resemblance. The two individuals in 'the Tourney' are clad in Yorùbá attire, with their heads substituted with the cube and dice. While there is a certainty about the Rubik's cube, at least for those skilled in manipulating the cube until all colours are aligned, the dice, a chance play cube is not certain. It is not given to any logic or certainty. The player can only hope that a desired number or combination of numbers (1-6) are shown when a die falls on one of its sides, revealing a number or sets of numbers. One could ask, is this player unsure of the next move? Could the number five signify what the payer is thinking about? Could that be a winning number?



Fig. 5: Akintayo Akintobi, 2021.
Aside Ilé làbò isinmi oko. Acrylic
on canvas, 24x48"

The Rubik's cube is the most dominant game structure Akintobi adopted in these works. Invented in 1974 by Ernő Rubik, the professor of architecture used the cube to teach his students about three-dimensional space. The Rubik has become one of the most famous puzzle games in the world. The Rubik's cube is at once a display of all the primary colors, green and white. This singular cube has been explored by young and old for many decades since its invention. Akintobi's exploration of the Rubik's cube and the other games in these paintings is unique; however, it is not the first time that artists have used this iconic toy/game as a concept in artistic rendition. Many artists globally have explored these colourful pieces of item in paintings, prints, digital arts and even sculptures. What is, however, unique in Akintobi's paintings is a return to the Yorùbá ideology and identity seen in the fabrics worn by the subject in these paintings. With titles such as *Ilé* (figure 6), *Òwú Ìyá gbòn* (figure 7), *Àlàdè and Àbèké* and *Ilé làbò ìsinmi oko*, Akintobi, who is far from home, remembers his roots



Fig. 6: Akintayo Akintobi, 2023. *ilé* (home). Acrylic and satin on canvas, 60x72"

The dress culture appropriated in these paintings reflects Yorùbá indigenous attire of *bùbá* and *ṣòkòtò* for men, and *iró* and *bùbá* for women. Is Akintobi thinking about home, or is he admonishing his fellow Yorùbá people to return to their cultural values, dress culture, and language in the face of foreign goods that flood the Yorùbá market today? Recently, there was a loud outcry about the print in mass production of Yorùbá *àdìrẹ* and batik imported from China. The Oṣoni of Ifè, and many Yorùbá cultural activists have spoken against such appropriation, which has severe negative implications to the local *àdìrẹ* production and market. *Àdìrẹ* *élékọ* patterns and design and *ànkára* form the core of fabrics intricately painted by Akintobi for these subjects.

In his word, Akintayo says,

I impress these symbolic patterns on various fabrics, locally woven mats, or the most suitable support. This lends luminousness to my craft and plays important roles in my artistic storytelling. My work examines people, places, and psyches. For artistic accurateness, I use features that are symbolic to my themes, or capable of being used allusively. Sometimes, like the works in this exhibition, these features work both ways – Game pieces serve as symbols of psyches and conditions, colors as adornments and mood reflectors, and patterns as symbols of people and places.

Akintóbi employs game theory as a stepboard to his visual representation. I took note of this innovation and development in his works shortly after leaving Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife as one of the most talented and inspiring students of his set. One of the developments that has emanated from his short studio practice is the exploration of gaming in his artistic representation. This he explored further for his MFA degree. What and why Akintobi explore this as a subject we might understand in future years? But, engaging with the works expresses what the mind thinks about whether to play games or not. Is that not what humans do with themselves as well as with others? As a toy or a form of game, the plastic materials adopted by Akintobi in these paintings could further express what he does in the studio. Is he still playing games, or has the game become a means to an end?



Fig. 7: Akintayo Akintobi, 2023. Òwú Ìyá gbòn. Acrylic on canvas, 36x48"

Historically, the works of Surrealists and Dadaists such as Duchamp and Dali present the art and play to us. These artists were some of the earliest who, through "their profound and bizarre artistic manifestations denote feelings of a game being played between themselves and their art and also the encouragement of play between their art and the voyeur's response to it".¹ Before these artists, one of the earliest appropriation of gaming is in "economics which is much like a game wherein players anticipate each other's moves, and therefore requires a new kind of mathematics, which they called game theory.

¹ <https://aestheticamagazine.com/games-theory-art/>

However, game theory generally does not share the fun or frivolity associated with games".² Frivolities of gaming as mentioned here may not be applied to games such as chess, explored in *Mind Game*, and *Ayò ọ́lọ́pọ́n* in the *Tourney*.

The *Tourney* which I have rechristened 'A ó parawa láyò' is one painting that appropriately captures the essence of gaming in this exhibition. As he says, "my work examines people, places, and psyches. For artistic accurateness, I use features that are symbolic to my themes, or capable of being used allusively. Sometimes, like the works in this exhibition, these features work both ways – Game pieces serve as symbols of psyches and conditions, colors as adornments and mood reflectors, and patterns as symbols of people and places".

Ilé làbò isinmi oko hold several meanings from the perspective of the Yorùbá and Akintayo who is a son of the soil. Born in Ibadan, and trained as an artist in Ilé-Ifè, the cradle of the Yorùbá people. This phrase literarily connotes that home is where we find rest after years of sojourn. Home here could mean a physical place, but it could also mean a return to something that one is familiar with. In the context of this body of work, it could also be translated as looking back to one's roots. Considering the titles and the material exploration of Akintayo in these paintings and particularly *Ilé làbò isinmi oko*. In the works such as *confidant*, *crossroad* and *What do we say to the god of death?* Akintobi explores the intimate relationship between humans and their pets. In these works, we are reminded of love between dogs, regard as many as man's best friends, cat and birds. This relationship dates to thousands of years and these animals and their owners have developed such close relationships that dogs and cats and birds such as parrots could hardly survive without man's support.

In works such as *confidant* (figure 8), *crossroad* (figure 9) and *what do we say to the god of death* (figure 10) Akintobi explores the intimate relationship between humans and their pets. In these works, we are reminded of the love between cats, birds and dogs, regarded by many as man's best friend. This relationship between humans and dogs dates to thousands of years. These animals and their owners have developed such close relationships that dogs and birds such as parrots could hardly survive without man's support.

Whatever the subject and material exploration by Akintobi, the paintings in the exhibition (figure 10) show an artist whose knack for details is top-notch. The paintings are colourful; the bright colours of the Rubik's cube add to the luminous surface property of these paintings. The brightness of the colours of the Rubik's and the background of some of the paintings represent the alertness required when playing games. On the other

² <https://www.britannica.com/science/game-theory>

hand, the coolness of the àdìrẹ indigo fabrics is calming—another condition needed for playing such games as chess and ayò ọlópón. **A o Para Wa Láyò, Olenle**

In works such as *confidant* (figure 8), *crossroad* (figure 9) and *what do we say to the god of death* (figure 10)



Fig. 8: Akintayo Akintobi, 2022, *Coinfidant*, Acrylic on canvas, 30x36"



Fig. 9: Akintayo Akintobi, 2022, What do we say to the god of death? Acrylic on canvas, 30x36"



Fig. 10: Akintayo Akintobi, 2022. Crossroads. Acrylic on canvas, 30x36"



Fig. 11: Akintayo Akintobi, on the right, with guest during the Exhibition in the USA.



Fig. 12: Akintayo Akintobi