



Islands of the Blessed
18 January - 17 February 2024

Berntson Bhattacharjee is pleased to present *Islands of the Blessed*, a solo exhibition of new works by British-Nigerian artist **Sola Olulode**.

Islands of the Blessed depicts an imaginary state of paradise where people are free to live and love without judgement, and acts as a homage to the historical significance of parks and gardens as safe spaces for the LGBTQI+ communities. The inspiration for this body of work was sparked by a trip to Barbados in 2021, a seven-week immersion in the island's rich culture. The daily swims, hikes and sunsets, as well as the freedom she felt throughout, left an indelible mark on Olulode. Subsequent visits across Caribbean islands deepened her fascination with the tropical landscapes, prompting a departure from her signature monochromatic palette to embrace a broader spectrum of colour in her painting. The works reflect the Caribbean's rich and bold hues, drawing inspiration from the cerulean blues of the ocean, the lush greenery, and the sun-kissed oranges, purples, and pinks of the evening sky. Blended into the landscapes are other places of significance to Olulode, such as the Lekki Conservation Gardens in Lagos and lakes in Berlin.

A recent trip to Rome fuelled Olulode's interest in mythology and timeless tales of love, lust and tragedy. The connection between lovers and the cosmos in ancient mythology is explored in this series, through stars and moons dyed into the canvases. Venturing into lesser-known queer mythologies, she draws inspiration from the nudity, fluidity of genders, and queer sexuality of various gods in these stories. Her figures are proudly yet peacefully nude, and many are consciously gender ambiguous. Acknowledging her early European painterly influences, such as the pre-Raphaelites, Olulode engages with the portrayal of the female form, seeking to reshape the historical narrative by conveying the lived experience of existing in a black woman's body from her perspective.

The "blessed" characters in this body of work carry a euphoric spirituality, capturing the energy of being in a state of divine repose and experiencing the nuances of falling in love, whether with someone else or oneself. Many of the figures in these paintings are derived from Olulode's holiday photographs, subtly referencing friends and herself. These personal experiences, basking nude in the freedom of nature and embodying inhibition, serve as a profound source of inspiration and contribute to the overall energy infused into the artworks.

Olulode intricately weaves in Nigerian histories and traditions of working with textile. Recognising the potency of dyeing the canvas, she employs this technique as a powerful means of infusing her paintings with layers of colour and depth. Through her adept use of mediums like wax, batik, oil bar, and impasto, Olulode skillfully produces textured works that pay homage to the profound cultural history that has influenced her art. For this body of work, she introduces new techniques to her artistic repertoire, drawing from insights gained in a recent workshop conducted in Lagos with traditional dyers. She integrates tie-dye techniques, including the intricate "sun and stars" method, into her works, showcasing her commitment to continued learning and mastery of her craft.

With an adept fusion of cultural nuances, historical story-telling, and a keen sense of space, Olulode's body of work serves as a testament to the intricate intersectionality of identity and

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45 Berners Street
London W1T 3NE

www.bbgallery.art
info@bbgallery.at



environment. Through a joyful interweaving of Black Queer representation and a profound conceptual engagement with storytelling, Olulode not only captures the essence of intersectionality but offers a vibrant tapestry that resonates with the complexities of the human experience.

About the artist

Sola Olulode (b. 1996) is based in London and received her BA in Fine Art Painting from the University of Brighton in 2018. In 2022, Olulode exhibited at 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair with Berntson Bhattacharjee and presented her first solo exhibition, 'Could You Be Love,' with Sapar Contemporary in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include; 'Burning, like the star that showed us to our love' at Ed Cross Fine Art (2023); 'Could You be Love' at Sapar Contemporary in New York (2023); 'Where the Ocean Meets the Beach' at V.O Curations in London (2020). Recent notable group exhibitions include; 'Dreaming of Home' at Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art in New York (2023); 'Reverie' at DADA Gallery in London (2023); 'Queer Intimacy' at Taymour Grahne Projects in London (2023); 'The Drawing Room' at Berntson Bhattacharjee in London (2021); 'An Infinity of Traces' at Lisson Gallery in London (2021); 'Breakfast Under The Tree' at Carl Freedman Gallery in Margate (2021); 'Stäying Alive' at Berntson Bhattacharjee in Falsterbo (2021); 'In Heavenly Blue' at Pacers Gallery in Lagos (2021).

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