

# Overview



*Rincon Falls-Black Leaf*, 2008. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with drypoint. 23½ x 14¾ inch image on 32½- x 22¾- inch sheet. Edition 20. All images printed by Catherine Brooks.

## Chris Ofili

by Kathan Brown

Off the coast of the Caribbean island of Trinidad, there is a small island with a cave that has one side open to the shore and the other to the sea; from a kayak you look through it to the ocean beyond. Every eleven to thirteen seconds a powerful tide flows into the cave and then recedes. As Chris Ofili's kayak rides up on the tide, he pulls sharply left and is delivered under a glistening waterfall inside. "If you don't make a quick left," he says, "you'll smash against a barnacle wall. It's an exercise in timing and total relaxation, letting the tide take you in and pull you back out."

We were standing in the studio at Crown Point Press looking at a pin wall of Ofili's seventeen etchings made over the previous two-and-a-half weeks. "It's all about that for me now," he added

softly. "The creative process is fluid, no beginning and no end."

Ofili moved to Trinidad in 2005. He was born in 1968 in Manchester, England of Nigerian parents, and studied in London at Chelsea College and the Royal College of Art. Ofili told students at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he lectured during his month-long 2009 stay in San Francisco, that he started out studying furniture design but switched to a major in art after taking a foundation course in which he "discovered that in art there is no right and wrong."

In 1992 he traveled to Zimbabwe on a grant from the British Council. There, he told the students, he saw "fantastic cave wall paintings. I remember a wall covered with dots. It just seemed



*Rincon Falls-Red Light*, 2008. Color spit bite aquatint with drypoint. 23½ x 14¾ inch image on 32½ x 22¾ inch sheet. Edition 20.



*Rincon Falls-Grey Bathers*, 2008. Color spit bite aquatint with drypoint. 23½ x 14¾ inch image on 32½ x 22¾ inch sheet. Edition 20.

like a strangely simple thing to do in a dark cave.” Dots became a motif he later used in his paintings. A second motif, also discovered in Africa, was elephant dung. “When I decided to work with it, I knew it was such a strong object that it would always draw attention to itself, so the challenge was to do something strong enough to co-exist with it.” Asked how he shaped the dung, he clapped hands and said “it falls from the elephant from such a height and speed that one side flattens. That makes it easy to stick it to canvas, and to rest paintings on it.” He returned from Africa with dung in his suitcase. When he needed more he visited the London zoo. “I met the keeper and said I wanted some elephant dung. He said, ‘Why?’ I said, ‘To use in my painting.’ He said ‘O.K.’ Later he told me he found it incredible that I told him the truth.”

Truth is paramount to Ofili, as it is to all good artists. “When you are in the studio you are completely honest,” he said. “But when you show the work people may see a different story. I was raised a Catholic. I went to a Catholic school and was an altar boy. I always wanted to make a painting about the Virgin Mary, and paintings about the Last Supper, and the Annunciation.” When his painting *The Holy Virgin Mary*, a black virgin with beautiful large eyes and one bare breast made of elephant dung, was shown at

the Brooklyn Museum in 1999, New York Mayor Rudolf Giuliani threatened to withdraw the museum’s funding. “I was aware of the knife-edge of blasphemy that I was walking on,” Ofili said in his lecture at SFAI.

A year earlier, 1998, Ofili had won the prestigious Turner Prize given by the Tate Gallery in London, and three years later, 2003, he represented Britain in the Venice Biennale. There, he said, the paintings in his installation called *Within Reach* were all painted “in black, red, and green, the colors of black nationalism, the colors of the Pan-African flag. Difficult colors for a painter, difficult to get them to behave.” He remembered working on those paintings and “feeling like being in another world, a black, red, and green world, a utopia of happiness and unity.”

Those words, when I heard them in the SFAI lecture, sent me for a moment to London, where six years earlier I had seen *The Upper Room*, an installation work of Ofili’s. This was Ofili’s version of the Last Supper. After entering the Victoria Miro Gallery you walked upstairs and down a long closed corridor to enter a semi-darkened room that held thirteen glorious paintings of monkeys in deep colors each one spotlighted and supported by two pedestals of elephant dung. When Ofili used the word “happy” in the San



*Rincon Falls-Green Locks*, 2008. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with drypoint and soft ground etching. 23½ x 14¾ inch image on 32½ x 22¾ inch sheet. Edition 20.

Francisco lecture, I momentarily revisited the feeling I had experienced in that room. I was suddenly happy. Simple as that, and just for a moment. Suddenly happy.

Of course, I told myself, you were happy then. You had stopped in London on the way back from the North Pole, your trip of a lifetime. And that's true. But the odd happy feeling came to me again, without any reference to London. This might seem a bit of a stretch, but honestly, it did happen. Just a few days ago, Valerie Wade, our director, hung our new Ofili prints in the Crown Point gallery. I was busy in my office all day and didn't realize what she was doing, so when I walked into the gallery it was a surprise. The dozen small prints in the *Rainbow* series were together on a wall between two windows, and I stood absorbed in them, feeling happy. "It's the strangest thing," I said to Valerie who, I belatedly realized, had been standing there. "It's just like *The Upper Room*."

"But I thought that was a dramatically lit installation work," she said. "Big paintings, bright colors."

"Elephant dung, dots, glitter," I continued her thought. "We have none of that. It's the strangest thing. He's trapped the same feeling using none of the same means, practically no means, in

fact. Comparatively, no means at all."

"In the work I'm doing now as an artist," Ofili said to me as he wound up his work in our studio at the end of 2008, "I want to know less about where I'm going, to embrace that more. About six years ago when you and I first met, I think I was afraid of not knowing because it might imply loss of control. Your invitation to make prints remained attractive over those years, but it did remind me of the abyss somehow."

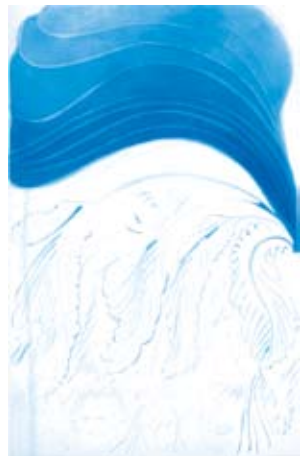
In the years that passed between my invitation to Ofili and his acceptance of it, he moved from London to Trinidad. In an interview (Fall 2007) in *Bomb* magazine he described the move as "leaving behind what I was, and re-starting the engine. ... Maybe the timing was right; I really wanted change, so I could see and absorb it rather than reject it. The continual challenge is trying to make art in this environment where you're quite close to the things that you're being inspired by." One of those things is Trinidad's predominantly black culture. Ofili is now creating some works specific to Trinidad just as some earlier ones are specific to Africa. At the Art Institute he made it clear that his work "isn't about whatever black culture is supposed to be about. I didn't want to be in a situation where the work was preaching or trying to right other people's wrongs. I wanted to be more nimble than that as an artist."

In an October 2007 exhibition called "Devil's Pie" at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York, Ofili showed the third of the three works he always wanted to do that conjoin black culture with his Catholic childhood. His Annunciation is a large bronze sculpture, described in the *New York Times* by Holland Cotter as "a nude woman, her skin buffed to gold, copulating with a vulturelike black angel." Cotter spoke of "another piece, *Saint Sebastian*, [that] bristles with spikes like an African Kongo power figure" and commented that "Mr. Ofili has always been forthright about the devotional spirit of his art; here he makes the cross-cultural nature of the spirit clear, and a little too clear." After a few more comments, Cotter concluded his review in this way: "We get a lot of airtight minor shows in Chelsea; it's not every day that you get to see a major artist thinking. You do here."

It's time to come back to the caves and the waterfalls shown in this newsletter. Through them you can see another thing about Trinidad that inspires Ofili and you can grasp very clearly how this artist thinks, how he approaches subject matter. *Rincon Falls*, the series title for the four middle-sized etchings, is the name of a waterfall on the north coast of Trinidad. "I go hiking a fair amount and look at and touch and photograph waterfalls," Ofili told me. "I've been trying to experience water falling in nature. I thought one of the most interesting things about coming to Crown Point would be to learn about making prints, so I didn't want to come with images ready to transfer. I thought, Why don't I go there with my source materials—photos, videos, memories—and try to make some prints that would be somehow the beginning of work



## Rainbow



All *Rainbow* images 2008, 11 x 7 inch image on 20 x 15 inch sheet, edition 10.

Left to right, top to bottom:

*Bown Bathers*. Spit bite aquatint with drypoint printed in brown on blue gampi paper chine collé.

*Yellow Day Dreamer*. Spit bite aquatint with drypoint printed in orange on yellow gampi paper chine collé.

*Violet Narcissus*. Spit bite aquatint with drypoint printed in purple on gampi paper chine collé.

*Red Cave*. Spit bite aquatint with flat bite etching and drypoint printed in red.

*Purple Palms*. Spit bite aquatint with drypoint printed in blue on yellow gampi paper chine collé.

*Orange Ramo*. Spit bite aquatint with drypoint printed in orange on blue gampi paper chine collé.

*Grey Seale*. Spit bite aquatint with drypoint printed in graphite on blue gampi paper chine collé.

*Paragon Pink*. Spit bite aquatint with drypoint printed in green on pink gampi paper chine collé.

*Green Riann*. Spit bite aquatint with drypoint printed in green on gampi paper chine collé.

*Turquoise Duo*. Spit bite aquatint with drypoint printed in blue on gampi paper chine collé.

*Pink Particles*. Drypoint printed in red on gampi paper chine collé.

*Blue Friends*. Spit bite aquatint with drypoint printed in blue.



*Last Night. New Day*, 2008. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with hard ground etching and drypoint. 45 x 20 inch image on 54 x 28 inch sheet. Edition 30.

# Crown Point Press

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with this subject? The dynamic for me was not just that I wanted to make fresh prints, but also I wanted the experience to be all new, and all about discovery, and that meant working with a subject that was new to me but has some history.”

In the *Rincon Falls* group, three of the images seem to me to be about touching water falling in nature. In *Red Light* you are dissolving in its energy; in *Grey Bathers* you feel its softness—its pleasure; and in *Green Locks* you are testing its strength—or yours against it. *Black Leaf*, the fourth image in the group, is a large leaf hanging between the trunks of two palm trees. A curl of blue wave breaks in the distance, and the leaf is backlit by a rainbow-hued waterfall.

The large image *Last Night. New Day* is a sublime memory of the interior of the cave at ocean’s edge, reached by kayak and glimpsed for a moment. It provides the stuff of daydreams. Two fragile figures embrace in the mist. The light glows in the falling water and glances off the waves.

“I can’t imagine not ever having a subject,” Ofili said in the interview in *Bomb*. “It is curiosity about subject, things of the world or otherworldly, that fuels art making. Yet in the process of making art the mind wanders and gives way to instinct, which feeds off areas the intellect doesn’t. The process is one of distillation to the point where it’s just essence, just itself.”



Chris Ofili in the Crown Point studio, 2008.

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