

V.
as in Venus
as in Vision
as in Voice
as in Visitor
as in Veronica
as in Virgin Mary
as in Void

Saint V. is the first solo exhibition of Monilola Olayemi Ilupeju in Austria and brings together a new body of work.

The eponymous oil painting *Saint V.* (2023) portrays Ilupeju's mother at 21, the age she migrated from Oyo State, Nigeria to Maryland, United States. Raised in an interfaith family between Islam and Christianity, Ilupeju's work explores religious iconography and the link between creative process and spiritual salvation.

Through painting, writing and installation, Ilupeju re-visits personal places and objects to reconfigure their forms and contents. Expanding on the classic genre of the nude self-portrait, as in the life-size cut out figure *In the Light of Day* (2023), the artist is drawn to intimate found objects (*Black Hole*, 2023) as carriers of embodied memory, history, and energy.

Ilupeju's recent use of recycled leather (*Collateral*, 2023, *Lost Hiker*, 2023, *All The Way*, 2023) as painting surfaces stems from the same interest with enlivened materials. The meditative scribbles and scratches on a discarded, deconstructed and pierced leather backpack, which the artist carried throughout her adolescence, serve as a portal to connect moments in time and modes of being. Reminiscences are inscribed into the resilient animal skin, understanding scars as traces of growth rather than wounds. *Pale of Crabs* (2023), so the title, refers to the tragic parable of a crab trying to crawl out of a bucket, only to be pulled back down by its own species. In another light, the piece refers to vulnerability of the backpack which, despite having long ago lost the drawstrings that kept it closed, never had an item lost or stolen; a reminder of the virtues of open-heartedness and that things are held together even without one's control.

Crucifixion (2023) presents a transcendental state of body and mind in which the nude figure dissolves into the void. It is a void that is more than the end or nothingness. Rather, it is a void that opens up new possibilities and reactivates what Audre Lorde would describe as follows:

"Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves—along with the renewed courage to try them out."
—Audre Lorde, *Poetry Is Not a Luxury*, 1985

The void is a space of uncertainty but also of transformation. Ilupeju's works have the transgressive potential to turn loss and discomfort into beauty, to befriend the unknown, and to ultimately fill the void with renewed ideas and restored faith.

Watch out. Your backpack is open.

Text: Miriam Bettin