

BAERT GALLERY

JEBILA OKONGWU

EXPO CHICAGO

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Jebila Okongwu critiques stereotypes of Africa and African identity and repurposes them as counterstrategies, drawing on African history, symbolism and spirituality. In his new series of *Banana Trees*, the artist explores the theme of transformation. The paintings are informed by collages assembled from banana boxes, a material which is loaded with the histories of slavery and human subjugation. As images of banana trees, the boxes are transformed into the positive symbols of growth and life.

At first glance, the works appear as joyous landscape paintings, suggesting Western idealisms of African locations - tropical plants and fruits, intense sunsets, ethnic handcrafts, and seaside holidays. Yet on closer inspection, we are ushered below the surface delving into the intricate web of power dynamics and identity struggles that have shaped history. The "exotic" provenance of the banana trees reveals a dark irony – the stereotyped exoticization of African bodies from an ethnocentric perspective. Furthermore, when banana boxes are shipped to the West from Africa, the Caribbean and South America, old routes of slavery are retraced, accentuating existing patterns of migration, trade, and exploitation.

Okongwu's work confronts the daunting task of conveying the visceral experiences within structures of domination such as colonialism, racism and exploitation, and although the representation of this aspect of blackness is central to his research, an even more important implication of these paintings is evident. The artist's *Banana Trees* are not burdened, but thriving. They may have borne witness to the worst atrocities of human subjugation, but they also demonstrate how nature itself can direct humanity towards the positive states of objectivity and collectivity. Drawing on the strong graphic tradition of the Eastern Nigerian Igbo tribe as well as the form of Californian psychedelic artists, the searing socio-political narratives about race and power at the core of these works have been dismantled, and transformed into images which represent life, growth and peace.

Born in London and then raised in Nigeria and Australia, Jebila Okongwu currently lives and works in Rome. He received a BA in Visual Art from Monash University and a Graduate Diploma in Fine Art from the University of Melbourne. His work has been exhibited at prominent international institutions including the Schlossmuseum, Linz, Austria (2020), the American Academy in Rome (2015), the Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples (2014), and the MACRO Museum of Contemporary Art, Rome (2013).