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Luke Agada

When the Center Holds

Sean Kelly, New York

September 11 – October 31, 2026

Opening reception: Thursday, September 10, 6-8pm

Sean Kelly is delighted to present *When the Center Holds*, Nigerian artist Luke Agada's first solo exhibition with the gallery. Bringing together a new body of paintings and drawings, the exhibition explores how meaning and belonging persist during periods of profound historical and cultural transformation. There will be an opening reception on Thursday, September 10, from 6–8pm. The artist will be present.

Agada's practice investigates the changing nature of contemporary identity through the lens of globalization, migration, and postcolonial thought. His enigmatic compositions feature incorporeal figures, fragmented architectures, and biomorphic forms that inhabit dreamlike landscapes untethered to a fixed geography. Existing between memory and imagination, these hybrid forms embody identities continually shaped through movement across histories, cultures, and systems of power.

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Playing off William Butler Yeats' poem, *The Second Coming*, which contains the phrase, "the center will not hold," Agada reimagines the darkness of that text in a more optimistic light. Rather than understanding the center as a site of fixed authority, Agada proposes it as a continually negotiated space where memory resists erasure, identity survives translation, and belonging is sustained despite displacement. His paintings occupy the intervals in which transformation unfolds, presenting suspension not as paralysis but as a condition of becoming.

Bodies dissolve into fluid architectures and landscapes that resist permanence. Fragmented forms merge and separate, suggesting that identity is not recovered, but continually composed through adaptation and relation. These psychologically charged environments resist fixed interpretation, instead inhabiting ambiguity as a space where continuity is actively constructed rather than inherited.

When the Center Holds reflects on quieter forms of endurance. The exhibition proposes that coherence is not a given, but something continually assembled through memory, imagination, and connection. In Agada's work, painting becomes a space where uncertainty is neither resolved, nor escaped, but inhabited with openness and resilience, offering a timely meditation on how we sustain meaning in an increasingly fractured world.

Born in 1992 in Lagos, Nigeria, Luke Agada received his MFA in Painting and Drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2023. His work has been featured in group exhibitions at institutions such as the African American Museum in Philadelphia; the Green Family Art Foundation, Dallas; the Hive Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing; and the African Artists' Foundation, Lagos amongst others. Agada has been a recipient of various awards and fellowships including Newcity's Breakout Artist, 2024; The James Nelson Raymond Fellowship Award, 2023; Janet and Russell Doubleday Award at The Art Students League of New York, 2022; The Helen Frankenthaler Award at SAIC, 2022; George and Ann Siegel Award, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, 2021; and a Teaching Fellowship at SAIC, 2023. He was an Artist-in-residence at MASS MoCA, MA, in 2023 and Dragon Hill Residence, Cannes, France in 2025. Agada currently lives and works in Chicago, IL.

For information about the exhibition, please visit skny.com

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Image caption: Luke Agada, *Of Tempest, Of Dreams*, 2026, Oil on canvas, 72 x 84 inches © Luke Agada Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York