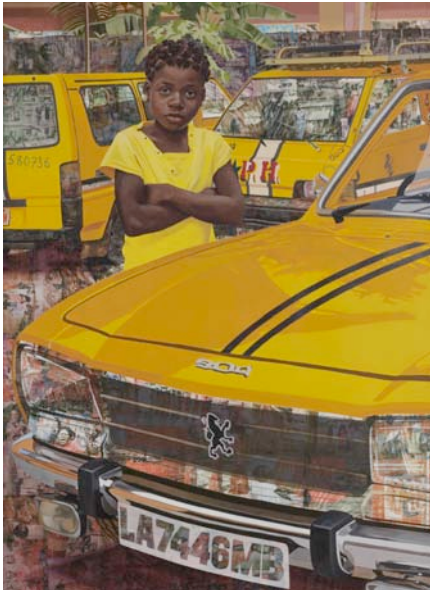


## Njideka Akunyili Crosby: “*The Beautiful Ones*”

Exhibition 8 May–13 July 2019

**Victoria Miro Venice**, Il Capricorno, San Marco 1994, 30124 Venice, Italy



**Njideka Akunyili Crosby** “*The Beautiful Ones*” Series #7, 2018

Acrylic, colour pencil and transfer on paper

152.1 x 108 cm, 59 7/8 x 42 1/2 in

© Njideka Akunyili Crosby

Courtesy the artist, Victoria Miro, and David Zwirner

**Victoria Miro presents the most recent works from Los Angeles-based artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby’s acclaimed series “*The Beautiful Ones*”.**

Begun in 2014, Njideka Akunyili Crosby’s ongoing series “*The Beautiful Ones*” is comprised of portraits of Nigerian children, including members of the artist’s family, derived from personal photographs and, more recently, from images taken during her frequent visits to Nigeria, where Akunyili Crosby lived until the age of sixteen. Its title is taken from the 1968 novel by the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, a book whose influence endured during the artist’s adolescence in the 1990s and is still felt today. In it, the author laments the lost idealism of a generation in the 1960s for a better Africa, post-independence. In “*The Beautiful Ones*”, Akunyili Crosby reinstates this optimism in her own and subsequent generations while offering a powerful perspective on the complexities of a contemporary diasporic experience.

Works on view include “*The Beautiful Ones*” Series #8, 2018, a portrait of a young boy who, wearing a traditional agbada tunic and a serious expression, stands in a living room in front of a stack of stereo equipment. A sound system appears again in “*The Beautiful Ones*” Series #9, 2018, a work that depicts three children, this time less formally posed, in a domestic interior that also includes a television, photographs and books. “*The Beautiful Ones*” Series #6, 2018 is a work based on a found image of a girl who, wearing a school uniform of a pinafore dress and checked shirt, stands amid the desks of an empty classroom. These interior images contrast with the street scene depicted in “*The Beautiful Ones*” Series #7, 2018, which shows a girl, arms folded, her eyes confidently meeting the viewer’s gaze, her bright yellow T-shirt echoing the vivid hue of the taxis that surround her.

In each of these apparently everyday scenes, precise in style, crystalline in appearance, certain details draw our attention to the multifaceted character of Akunyili Crosby's subjects: the bright tote bag with which the schoolgirl has accessorised her outfit; the outsized earrings and buttoned vest of the confident T-shirt wearing girl. Other details – a hairstyle, or the heft of an old-school hi-fi, for example – scramble a sense of time. Is this now, or the 1980s? Whose childhood are we witnessing? These details, in turn, draw us into a second wave of imagery, only truly discernible close-up. Applied using an acetone transfer technique are photographic images derived from sources including Nigerian politics and pop culture. There are references to the country's colonial past, and to stories that appear in our newsfeeds today. Along with more personal imagery, they pervade the composition, as music might from the stereos Akunyili Crosby depicts, pulsing rhythmically across the picture plane, first as background notes then as bright accents.

It is partly through this labour-intensive process that Akunyili Crosby addresses the idea of cultural overlap and the complex layering of influences – personal, cultural, historical and political – on people, even those such as *The Beautiful Ones*, whose age might suggest characters and histories as yet unwritten. In this, the work resonates strongly with the western tradition of childhood portraiture, whose evolution across the centuries is broadly in line with the shifting status, and often precarious reality, of childhood itself. While portraiture is always to some degree an act of commemoration, to capture and preserve the image of a child necessitates a degree of projection and reflection – of hopes, fears, innocence or its loss – on behalf of the artist and viewer alike. The pleasures of childhood are necessarily seen through the prism of adulthood, through its own pleasures, or anxieties of which the children depicted may well remain blissfully unaware. Akunyili Crosby renders these in her complex layers. They are images of childhood freighted with adult experience.

One of the catalysts for the series is a portrait of Prince Baltasar Carlos by Diego Velázquez, which sparked in the artist a childhood memory of her sister in a similarly regal pose at her birthday party when she was around ten years old ("*The Beautiful Ones*" *Series #1c*, 2014). This short-circuiting effect of (self) recognition, how we might feel we 'know' somebody –through a simple glance or gesture and the way in which a painting can reach out across centuries or continents and resonate is one of the pillars of Akunyili Crosby's art. Equally, she reminds us that, even when apparently unguarded, childhood is always a cultural construct. In some respects, *The Beautiful Ones* seem as coded as any royal portrait by Holbein in the sixteenth century, or Velázquez or Van Dyck in the seventeenth century. In particular, Van Dyck's full-size portraits of royal progeny, framed by architectural motifs and enlivened with details designed to confirm status or invite narrative speculation, seem to find contemporary echoes in a work such as "*The Beautiful Ones*" *Series #9*, where, among the books and possessions sits a framed photograph of the artist, her sisters and mother.

In this sense, while "*The Beautiful Ones*" are culturally specific – the product of a time, place and unique set of circumstances – they speak equally of the ways in which the nature – essence, even – of time and place have altered irrevocably, variously accelerated, expanded or contracted by migration, for example, or technological advance. Moreover, they speak to the effects of this transformation on selfhood and, as a corollary, the fundamentals of what makes a true and vital portrait today.

As "*The Beautiful Ones*" makes clear, it is not only the pose, the gesture, the way we wear our hair or rock a T-shirt, that reveals who we are, but the interleaving of history, experiences collective and individual, which we all wear, perhaps less conspicuously but, in the end, just as revealingly as the expressions on our faces or the clothes on our backs.

## **About the artist**

Njideka Akunyili Crosby was born in Enugu, Nigeria in 1983 and currently lives and works in Los Angeles. She is the recipient of a 2017 MacArthur Fellowship and was named one of The Financial Times' Women of the Year, 2016, alongside featuring in the Future Generation Art Prize 2017. Other prizes and awards include the Prix Canson Prize, 2016; Foreign Policy's Leading 100 Global Thinkers of 2015; the Next Generation Prize, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2015; the Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize, 2015; and the Smithsonian American Art Museum's James Dicke Contemporary Art Prize, 2014. Recent solo exhibitions include *Njideka Akunyili Crosby: "The Beautiful Ones"*, National Portrait Gallery, London (2018–2019); *FOCUS: Njideka Akunyili Crosby –Counterparts*, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas (2018–2019); The Baltimore Museum of Art (2017–2018); *Njideka Akunyili Crosby: Predecessors*, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH, which toured to Tang Museum at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY (2017); *Portals*, Victoria Miro, London (2016), *I Refuse to be Invisible*, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach (2016) and *The Beautiful Ones*, Art + Practice, Los Angeles (2015), staged concurrently with a solo presentation at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2015).

In addition, Akunyili Crosby has recently exhibited at institutional venues including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2016); the New Museum, New York (2015); The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2014); Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (2014); Landcommandery of Alden-Biesen, Bilzen, Belgium (2014); BRIC, New York (2013); Bronx Museum, New York (2013); and the Museum of New Art Detroit (2012). Her work is in the collections of major museums including Yale University Art Gallery, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Tate, The Norton Museum of Art, Zeitz MOCAA, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, MoMA, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Current public projects include an outdoor mural for MOCA Los Angeles Grand Avenue, on view until the end of February 2019; and *Remain, Thriving*, 2018 the first commission in a new programme at Brixton station, on view until April 2019.

In November 2019, Akunyili Crosby will feature in the exhibition *Interiorities* at Haus der Kunst, Munich. In 2020, her work will be the subject of a solo exhibition at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut; the third in a trilogy of solo exhibitions curated by Pulitzer Prize-winning author and critic Hilton Als.

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