

Sola Olulode *Burning, like the star that showed us to our love*

Ed Cross, London 10 August – 16 September

Most of the 28 paintings on canvas in *Burning* depict black bodies in moments of intimacy, backlit by yellow sunbursts. All are figurative and executed in a bold, illustrative graphic style and a range of materials including dye, ink, wax, oil paint, pastel, acrylic, charcoal and batik. Moreover, the walls in the larger of the two rooms that make up Ed Cross are hung floor-to-ceiling with hand-dyed blue fabrics. While the overall effect of this staging disappoints – the installation is half-patchwork, half-boudoir – it does make the paintings appear even more like a document of the cycles of the sun. And that in turn brings to mind a phonetic echo – solar – of the British Nigerian artist's first name and a sense that what we are witnessing doesn't stray too far outside of Sola Olulode's personal orbit.

The paintings almost uniformly depict joyful intimacy, yet there's a compelling friction on their surfaces and between the different materials deployed. In *Sunlight* (2019), translucent sheets of blue wax overlap to make up

the clothing adorning two bodies. A thick black outline surrounds each, while the backdrop's yellow paint has been etched with tiny circles. The central figures' faces are neighbored by pale floating heads, where the batik process has masked the canvas. The figures don't look as content as some of Olulode's other couples – they have fugitive facial features, after all. But the work is an example of the show at its best: when works foreground their materiality in this way; when the paintings' materials accrue emotional resonance and become significant to what they depict.

For instance, the two hugging figures in *She walked up to me in the street and embraced me* (2023) are outlined in soft, gritty charcoal – a porous boundary for their paired bodies. Does intimacy make us more vulnerable? Expressive golden rays appear to pass through the transparent bodies painted in *In the Bubble of Your Love* (2023) and *The heat of your love radiates through me* (2023). If we believe their titles, it's love that seems to have swept away their insides. *Send Nudes* (2023)

features a single figure – the only painting to do so – taking a nude mirror-selfie. The globular acrylic outline of the woman's body is just discernible – by means of the change in texture – against the dyed yellow canvas. Moreover it appears to have multiple adjacent edges, which in turn encourages an intimate back-and-forth as the viewer's eye searches for the boundary of her body.

For the most part, Olulode's depictions of intimate moments (there's a suggestion but perhaps not quite insistence that these moments are queer) feel as if they've been restrained from intimacy's usual dynamism. Even at their most dynamic, the paintings remain scenic: between *In the Bubble's* two joyful, dancing figures is a nearly-camouflaged drawing of two women kissing – perhaps a memory, perhaps a premonition. Dispersed across the painting, black circles reminiscent of bubbles suggest just how late we come to Olulode's scenes: it looks as if these bubbles have burst and dried-up. Which reminds us, perhaps, that romance doesn't stay fresh forever. *Madeleine Jacob*



Bathing in the light of your love, 2023,
batik, ink and acrylic on canvas, 80 cm (diameter). Photo: Rocio Chacon.
Courtesy the artist and Ed Cross, London