

JEBILA OKONGWU

September 21 – December 14, 2019

Baert Gallery is pleased to present a solo exhibition of new paintings and sculptures by Nigerian/British artist Jebila Okongwu. This will mark the second solo show at the gallery for the Rome-based artist.

Jebila Okongwu critiques stereotypes of Africa and African identity and repurposes them as counterstrategies, drawing on African symbolism, spirituality and history. Socio-political concerns are also fundamental to his art.

Okongwu often works with banana boxes, having observed that their cliched slogans and tropical graphics articulate an 'exotic' provenance, much like the exoticisation of African bodies from an ethnocentric perspective. When these boxes are shipped to the West from Africa, the Caribbean and South America, the old routes of slavery are retraced, accentuating existing patterns of trade, migration and exploitation.

For this exhibition, Okongwu continues his investigation into the dynamics of power and exploitation. In a large installation, the artist has created a scenario in which the spaces inside five monumental banana boxes have become the claustrophobic cells of a BDSM dungeon. The holes, which usually function as inbuilt handles for the boxes, are suggestive of peep or glory holes at a larger scale and provide glimpses of confined spaces where the accoutrements of BDSM role-play are visible. Constructed from plywood and hand painted with acrylic paint, the boxes are covered with the logos of multinational fruit importers.

The exhibition also includes a series of oil paintings in which various logos on the boxes have been overlaid with images of chains. By the coupling of corporate graphics with imagery related to BDSM, the artist hopes to initiate a dialogue about persistent racial stereotypes and the relationship of Western Capitalism to the exploitation and disempowerment of people in the developing world.

Prominent institutions that have hosted exhibitions of the artist include the American Academy in Rome, the Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples, and the MACRO Museum of Contemporary Art, Rome. His work is featured in the recently released '100 Sculptors of Tomorrow' published by Thames and Hudson.