

'Did I fall here', installation view



What are you holding onto, 2026, installation view



Empty Nests, 2026

Profile

Olu Ogunnaike

The British-Nigerian artist subtly reorients perceptions of space to question what holds the inside from outside, the inherent values contained in wood, dust and offcuts, and what might remain after the fire.

'We carry in our eyes the dust of entanglement', the Buddha reportedly said, an entanglement of past images, memories and histories that distort how we receive the present. This entanglement lessens our capacity to see the person in front of us, to fully experience the moment we are living in, but also to see ourselves. In many respects, Olu Ogunnaike uses his multiform practice to disentangle us from these veils of misperception to see things more clearly. The materials he favours include wood, charcoal dust, mirrors, frames, metal sculptures and photography. His recent solo show, 'Did I fall here' at Hollybush Gardens in London, builds on the success of single and group presentations at Spike Island, the Royal Academy of Art, Bold Tendencies and Goldsmith's CCA, amongst others.

The existential disorientation that is central to Ogunnaike's work was immediately apparent on entering 'Did I fall here'. Met by an underlit space reconfigured from the usual gallery entrance, *What are you holding onto?*, 2026, sucks us into a stud wall of dark OSB (Oriented Strand Board) framing a door-sized window that overlooks the rest of the gallery. Used in hoarding to protect construction or hide disrepair, OSB is made of compressed scraps of off-cut wood. It is ubiquitous but barely seen. What is being protected or hidden here? The lo-fi materials manage to exude an exclusive choosiness. For a second we are the outsiders, unsure how to proceed, provoking questions around who galleries privilege.

Ogunnaike creates his own brand of OSB, recycled from bits of tropical hardwood, often imported to Europe from formerly colonised countries. Its deep tones offset the light and dark brick columns that frame the entrance and point to the gallery's industrial past, and the labour required to make this work. Inside the gallery, on the flip side of *What are you holding onto?*, the window becomes a two-way mirror where we are the artwork, as Jocelyn Longdon states in her excellent essay, 'you're forced to occupy the *in-between*. You are at once spectator *and* subject.' Here the OSB panels have been partially coated in a mix of white plaster and mud, suggesting processes of stalled gentrification. Whiteness, you could say, has tried to impose itself. At once, in the occupancy of the mirror, the other side and those who can still see us from there, are forgotten. Who is this unseen other, who remains at the periphery of representation, forever stranded, looking in, unreflected? As Anne Carson writes in her poem 'Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988) by Betty Goodwin', 'If buried all but traceless in the dark in i ts energy sitting, drifting within your own is another body.'

The theme of positionality and control of the gaze is furthered in the series of photographs *Way more than a glimmer*, 2026. Gazing at the images made from charcoal dust on mirrored steel, you must stand to one side to see what you are looking at. The more you see of your reflected self, the less you see of the image.

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There's a cinematic tenderness to this black-and-white sequence whereby a silhouette stands in front of a brick wall with foliage in the near view; a toddler is held aloft against a building of lit windows; and a tote bag saying 'Home Lover', left on a double yellow line, presents a glorious pun on where home is for someone who experiences being a Londoner in Lagos and a foreigner in London. The titles of Ogunnaike's earlier works, such as *You are here* and *Somewhere else, but here*, both 2021, highlight the recurring concern of place and displacement throughout his practice.

In-between-ness is central to *Where to from here?*, 2021, which was included in his solo show at Museum Folkwang in Essen. A ghostly half-figure, just legs and lower torso, stands facing away in the middle of six panels of mirrored steel, shaky in its coat of birchwood charcoal dust. It is painterly and evocative with the uncertainty and signlessness of each and every life, but especially resonant for the immigrant or the refugee. The patterns in the dust resemble flickers of light on water, evincing further feelings of displacement and lack of stability. As Cédric Fauq writes, 'the image *reunites* with its materiality, merges back with its origins'. The image seems to hover, not solid or fixed, like all our mutable futures.

In *Empty nests*, 2026, three large UV prints are presented on plywood board. Ogunnaike explains that they echo the CMYK colour model used in printing: cyan, magenta, yellow and black. The cyan image shows two men installing a security light under a vast tree in Lagos, where the artist's grandmother was born. In the magenta image, sunset flares across the grain of the plywood, through branches of a tree in Warri, birthplace of Ogunnaike's mother. The final image shows a man sitting on park railings in Brixton, where the artist was raised, bleached by the yellow dapple of London planes. In each, the trees are dominant, positioned as witnesses, sentinels or companions, signifiers of silent acceptance and non-discrimination. The work recalls the contradictions of belonging and unbelonging in the lush paintings of Hurvin Anderson that blend the apple orchards of his English childhood with the mango trees of adulthood in Jamaica. But where is the black in CMYK? Apparently (for I know little about printing), the black ink plate is the key. It provides the alignment and the deep contrast for the final image. It is the focus, the filter, the eye in all of Ogunnaike's works.

Leftovers, 2026, follows up on earlier work of the same title in which Ogunnaike uses scattered charcoal dust to create ghost residues. The artist hung the series *Way more than a glimmer*, laden with charcoal dust, which he slowly brushed off. He then removed the photographs, leaving the smoky echoes of oblongs and the rawl plugs of the hang. As a beautiful and arresting memorial to time passed, these haunting liminal leavings mark out a dimensionality of change and absences. Ogunnaike asks, 'Can I use these societal associations as a type of material in their own right?' It's a staged stillness that performs flux: from within the gallery itself where art must be transient to the sooty particles of incinerated wood that meld into the cycles of growth and decay which surround and sustain us.

The title of the final work at Hollybush Gardens, *Did I fall here?*, 2026, could refer to a felled tree, or to the end of Ogunnaike's journeying. Twelve wooden frames calendar the floor, each empty and charred, standing in a row like small hurdles. Repeating the size of the ghost-images above, these blackened frames are salvage: could they signify all the black artists who've never been shown or, like Frank Bowling, have to wait until they are octogenarians before becoming critically valued? But these balanced remnants are tougher than they seem. Ogunnaike used a similar technique in his exhibition 'Who's next' at CAPC (Museum for Contemporary Art in Bordeaux) in 2021, where he torched a long pine table where all the museum staff had just been treated to lunch. This 18th-century Japanese technique, known as *Shou Sugi Ban* or *Yakisugi* (*sugi* means 'cedar' in Japanese), creates a carbon shield which protects the wood. It also suggests 'cultural burn' or 'good fire', used for thousands of years by indigenous peoples across the globe, whereby controlled burning of the forest not only controls rot, fungal disease and pests, but also makes the trees more resistant to wildfires.

The idea of 'cultural burn' or 'cool burn' suits Ogunnaike's practice. It gains vitality and clarity at the edge of obliteration, assimilation and disappearance. As poet Oluwaseun Olayiwola writes in *Strange Beach*, 'I pretend I can see them, / the disappearances, / the transparent doors. / No / one notices.' With subtlety and precision, Ogunnaike makes them seen and helps us to trace them too.

Olu Ogunnaike's exhibition 'Did I fall here' was at Hollybush Gardens, London, 25 September to 31 October.

Cherry Smyth is a poet and art writer.