

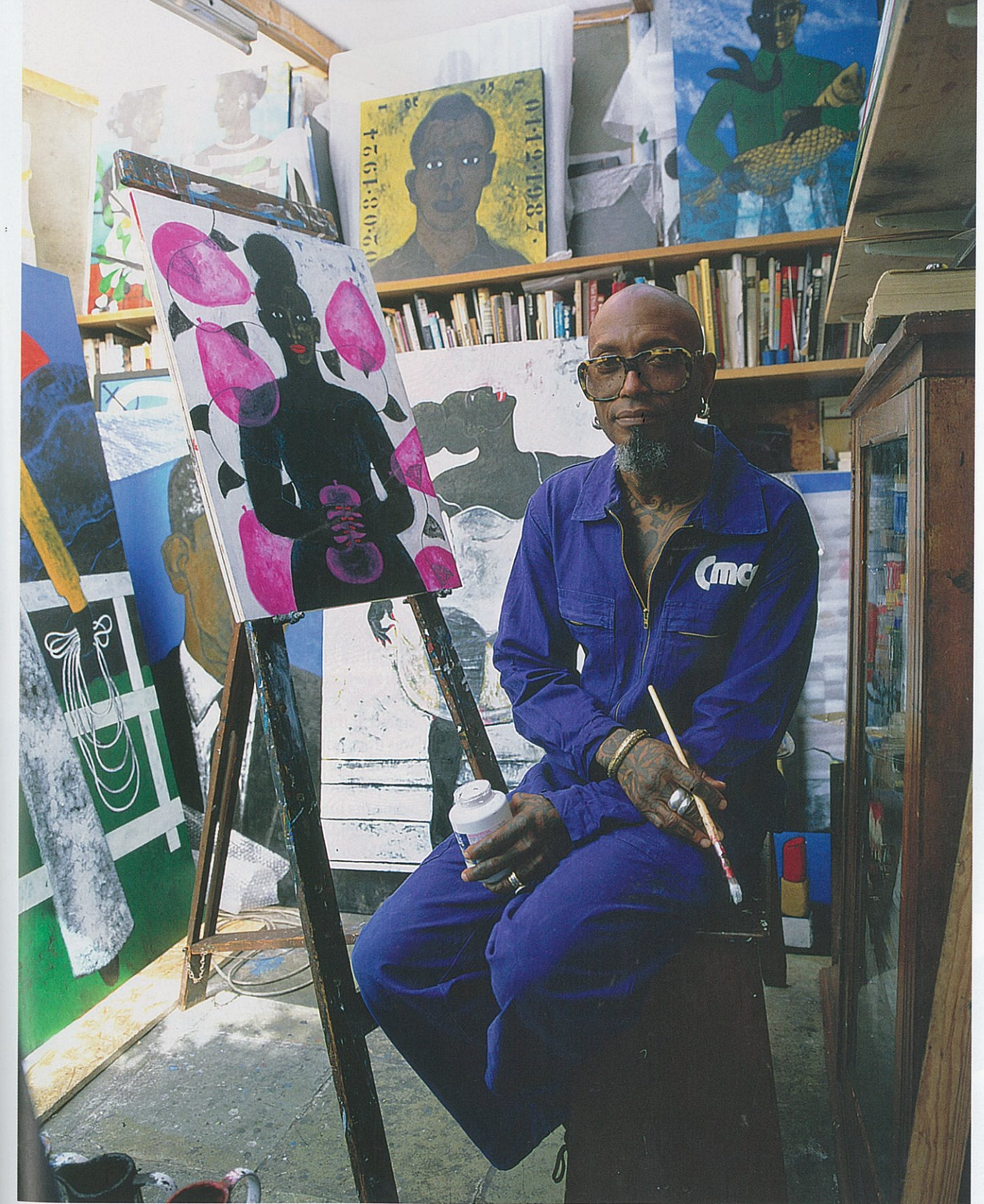
OCTOBER 2018 £4.99

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS





This page: Abe Odedina's small garden studio. 'Most of my figures are in white,' he says. 'It's an ambitious colour to wear. It's about purity.' Opposite: the studio was originally an office for Odedina's architectural work. When he began making art, he demolished the surfaces to use as canvases



IDOL SPECULATION

Ten years ago in Salvador, Brazil, artist Abe Odedina had an epiphany when he discovered Candomblé, a hybrid of Catholicism and Nigerian Yoruba. Becoming fascinated by faith in all its forms, he began filling his home - and work - with Haitian Vodou flags, African headdresses and Mexican votive paintings. Today, his divine intervention has turned an ordinary London dwelling into a real house of the spirits. Peter Watts sings its praises. Photography: Jan Baldwin



'I'VE NEVER met a god I don't like,' says Abe Odedina with a grin in his south London kitchen. 'That's why I venerate most of them in my paintings.' It's a house packed with deities from all cosmologies; they sit contentedly alongside each other on bookshelves and in cabinets, a democratic medley of statues, sculptures and votive offerings from all religions, continents and eras. The gods are Odedina's muses and in the garden, in his small studio, he paints colourful figures in acrylic on plywood, inspired by Haitian Vodou, Nigerian Orishas and Christian saints, among others.

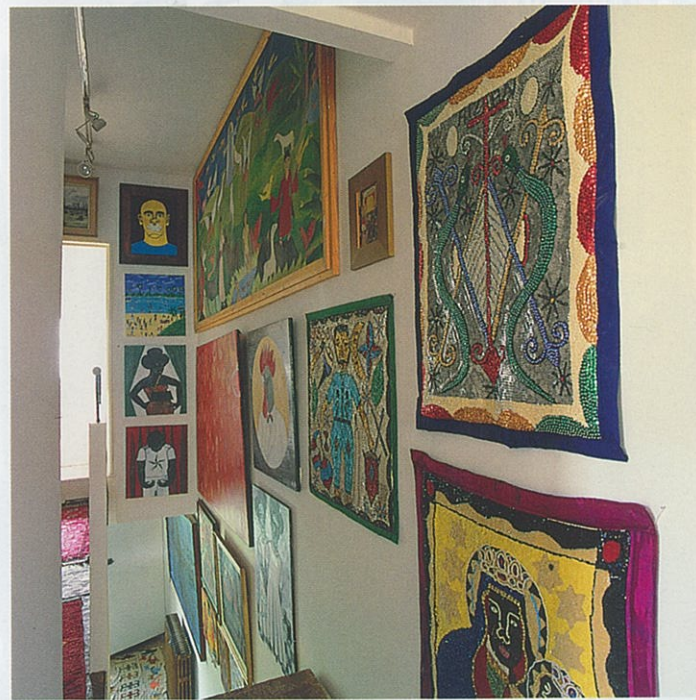
Clad in a blue boiler suit, Odedina is ready for business. He talks quickly, eager to communicate the themes behind his work and demystify the process. Born in Nigeria, he was raised in Britain and trained as an architect in Hull. He moved to Brixton in 1987 and began to remodel the house he shares with his wife, the publisher and ceramicist Sarah Odedina, two grown-up children having since moved out. 'It was totally unremarkable,' he says of the three-bed Victorian terrace. 'So we thought that over time we'd have a word with it. It was about giving ourselves more space, and bringing in light using materials we could afford – that way it doesn't matter if you get it wrong.' They knocked through the hallway to create a larger living area, and the solid stairs were replaced with an open-plan design, providing a view from the front door through to the garden. A small dining room/conservatory went up and one wall was lined with mirrors.

Many of the materials were sourced cheaply. The kitchen floor is made from salvaged tiles and timber, while the huge gas stove once belonged in the kitchen of the London College of Fashion, which Odedina was transforming into a gallery. 'All the textures are tied together by the bits and pieces we have collected over the years, which show what we like and how we live,' he says. The house feels planned, but isn't fussy. It's filled with objects but not cluttered. That makes it rather like Odedina's skin, every inch of which is covered in tiny tattoos that combine to form a single tapestry. He designed them himself, and went to the tattoo parlour every Friday for four years until the work was done.

Several of the deities on the walls come from Brazil, which is where Odedina had his artistic epiphany ten years ago. He was in Salvador, the former Brazilian capital and centre of Afro-Brazilian culture, when he discovered the faith of Candomblé, which combines aspects of Catholicism with the Orishas, the gods of Nigeria's Yoruba. 'In Salvador, I reconnected with the Orishas, who were cast aside in Nigeria in the project of modernism,' says Odedina. 'This thing that had been created in Brazil was a wonderful hybrid. There was a lot of trauma but the end result was a new thing informed by Catholicism as well as African tradition. This is how religions have always worked.'



Top: Odedina and his wife, Sarah, knocked through the hallway to create an open-plan living area. He painted the chest next to the leather armchair with symbols and slogans. Above: one of Sarah's ceramic pots sits on the table in the conservatory beneath an assortment of model limbs from Brazil. 'The limbs are in the votive tradition, praying to god for relief or cure,' says Odedina. Opposite: in the living room, this picture by Scottish artist Derek Roberts was the first the couple ever purchased: 'When I bought this,' he says, 'I had no conception I'd ever be a painter'



Odedina was fascinated by the faith of others and the 'energy around this creative veneration in people's lives'. He began painting and eventually gave up architecture to focus on it full time. His diptych *The Adoration of Frida Kahlo* was nominated for the BP Portrait Award and displayed at the National Gallery in 2013. A steady stream of exhibitions followed, the latest of which will be at the Downstairs gallery in the Department Store, the Brixton office of Squire & Partners architectural practice. Part of the London Design Festival, it is called *True Love* and the paintings were commissioned by film director Danny Boyle for the Dramatic Need charity.

Only a few of Odedina's paintings hang in the house. Instead, space is given over to other artists, most of whom work with a similarly bright palette. Yet it's the three-dimensional religious iconography that really captures the attention, with extraordinary statues from all over Africa, South America and the West Indies. Mortality is a common theme: models of diseased limbs hang from the conservatory ceiling, a stuffed caiman sits dead-eyed on one bookshelf and a human skull rests on the writing desk. Meanwhile, in the cabinet under the staircase are a number of carved phalluses. These objects inspire the style, concerns and philosophy of Odedina's work. He singles out some Mexican votive paintings, Haitian Vodou flags and two sculptures from the Congo that were made from wood, covered in organic material and then pierced with nails.

'This collection of tribal pieces is completely central to my work – this is the tradition that anchors my expression,' he explains. 'It's the idea that there's a language and legibility to them. I don't ask anybody to believe in anything, I just say look at all the different ways we can comprehend objects. Just look and think, don't worry about the rules. I'm not immersed in the rituals of the Congo, but I enjoy the objects in other ways. I try to charge my paintings the same way, to tell you something about the concerns.'

Odedina's paintings are often infused with symbolism in the form of cards and money, and he also likes 'the authority' of distinguishable objects. 'I use objects to create the landscape and show the character's attributes, back story and aspirations,' he says. Yet despite the proliferation of gods and saints, the relationship between Odedina's work and where he lives essentially rests on a concern for the homely. 'The whole house is the studio and a lot of the work is domestic,' he continues. 'I privilege this realm because even with great events the real impact is felt at home. It matters when you cross the threshold and see how it affects you and your family. That's when I get interested' ■

'True Love' runs at Downstairs at the Department Store, 248 Ferndale Rd, London SW9 (020 3598 6971; downstairsbrixton.com), as part of the London Design Festival, 15-23 Sept. To contact Abe Odedina, ring 07507 067567, or visit edcrossfineart.com



Top: this space under the stairs has been turned into a display area. Inside the cabinet are all manner of religious statues, a collection of carved phalluses, and artworks by the couple's now-adult daughters. Above: these colourful Haitian Vodou flags on the upstairs landing are used by priests to signal the start of ceremonies. Odedina borrows from this visual tradition in his own painting. Opposite: in the bedroom, a dramatic wooden head is covered in leather. It was made by the Ekoi people of Nigeria to be worn during young women's coming-of-age celebrations