

Felsenthal, Julia. "In a New Exhibition, Designer Duro Olowu Fashions a Portrait of Chicago," *Vogue*, 13 January 2020.

VOGUE



Olowu, photographed at his boutique in London in 2015. Photo: Getty Images

"What drives Chicago is still a mystery to me," says Duro Olowu, speaking by phone from the city's Museum of Contemporary Art, where lately he's been pondering such matters as he puts the final touches on the expansive new art exhibition he's curated, *Duro Olowu: Seeing Chicago*, opening February 29.

It all began one fall morning during Frieze London, when MCA director Madeleine Grynsztejn asked the Nigerian-born British designer if he'd like to collaborate on a show. Olowu balked at the suggestion of a fashion retrospective—"It's the reality of being driven by the possibilities of the future, not the things you've done in the past," he says—but then Grynsztejn made him an offer he couldn't refuse: the whole of the main museum space to work in, and carte blanche to "do what you want."

Seeing Chicago represents the first time the MCA has invited a non-art professional to guest-curate, but for Olowu, it's only the latest in a series of increasingly ambitious curatorial projects. Decades ago, fresh out of university, he ran a small gallery in Lagos showcasing the work of artists like Prince Twins Seven-Seven. Later he drew upon that experience to design his London boutique, where he displays his raucously patterned and patchworked dresses and jackets against a backdrop of aesthetic touchstones: vintage Indian studio photographs; Malian Bambara masks; artwork by Stanley Whitney, Glenn Ligon, and Deborah Roberts. Olowu considered that mix "an assemblage," but his wife, Studio Museum in Harlem director Thelma Golden, saw the makings of a show. When Olowu installed a fashion pop-up and art exhibition at Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn's Manhattan gallery Salon 94 Freemans in 2012, the critics agreed with Golden, bestowing glowing reviews. A second outing at Salon 94 Bowery followed. But it wasn't until 2016, when Olowu mounted his blockbuster exhibition *Making & Unmaking* at London's Camden Arts Centre, that he finally began to see his side hustle in a more serious light.

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A tale of one city among the artworks on display in *Duro Olowu: Seeing Chicago* are compositions by the painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, 1 PM, Mason's Yard, 2014. "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and Corvi-More, London.

In Chicago, Olowu's initial idea was to create an exhibition that showcased art from the MCA's collection—but wandering the city on an early visit, his ambition ballooned. What if he could draw work from all of Chicago's museums, as well as from its vast private collections, to make a portrait of a city through the art invested in by its denizens? The result is a wide-ranging survey of more than 300 works culled from 13 institutions and 51 private lenders. The designer hopes his show encourages the city "to hold a mirror up to itself—with pride as well as reflection." The project's only commission, from sculptor Maren Hassinger, is a good example: Hassinger titled her work *And a River Runs Through It*, which describes Chicago's geography—but also, presumably, its ongoing history of racial segregation.



Multimedia artist, Jeffrey Gibson. Jeffrey Gibson, *To Say I Love You Right Out Loud*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta, Chicago.

Olowu's show is as much about what Chicagoans have collected as it is about what they've created. He features prominent local artists like Kerry James Marshall; Chicago Imagists Ed Paschke and Karl Wirsum; Jae Jarrell and Gerald Williams, members of the city's *Africobra* collective. But many of the artists are foreigners—Eritreans, Pakistanis, Mexicans, Malians—connected to the city only because a Chicagoan acquired their work. Olowu's curatorial approach breaks down art-historical silos and flattens hierarchies between craft and sculpture, fine painting and outsider art, eras and mediums. "I never like labels, because I always felt they were mostly used in ways that weren't very generous," he observes.

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The MCA's Naomi Beckwith, Olowu's partner in organizing *Seeing Chicago*, praises the designer's "transcultural" lens: "There's this idea that no place, no art movement is totally isolated." A biomorphic Jean Arp sculpture chats with a Tomma Abts painting that echoes its curvilinear shape; a Simone Leigh face jug is in dialogue with a terra-cotta vessel by the Kenyan-born ceramist Magdalene Odundo; lithographs by Sigmar Polke commune with the funky textile art of Kim MacConnel (a happy discovery for Olowu in the MCA archives). "When people ask, 'What makes you say art is good?' I ask myself: 'Is it important?' In so many ways, that answers a lot of questions," he explains.



The show puts many pieces in conversation likely for the first time, including Tomma Abts's *Lüer*, 2017 (left) with Jean Arp's *Torso*, 1931. Tomma Abts. *Lüer*, 2017. Lin/Cologne/New York.

Olowu's designs have a place in his show, too, though he draws the line at calling them art. "Clothing," he says, "does something else for the human spirit." In the final room, mannequins clad in his garments appear like patrons in an 18th-century French salon, ogling the art and objects displayed chockablock from floor to ceiling. "A lot of these things will never have been in the same room together," Olowu marvels. "That's exciting for me!"

Then, as if to allay any fears he'll quit his day job: "almost as exciting as putting a silk jacquard with a denim and getting something great out of it."