

Behind the Glass Ndidi Emefiele

Curated by Pájú Oshin



Ndidi Emefiele, *Search party*, 2018, acrylic, pasted print papers, textile, compact disk and plastic trim on canvas, 180 x 180cm

Behind the Glass presents a career-spanning look at the work of Nigerian-British artist Ndidi Emefiele, bringing together paintings and mixed-media works made over more than a decade of practice. The exhibition moves from Emefiele's earliest canvases made in Nigeria, through to the large-scale, mixed-media compositions she has become well known for.

At the heart of Emefiele's practice is a recurring motif: the oversized glasses worn by the women who populate her paintings. Rendered in paint, textile, collage, and found materials, and hand-stitched rather than glued into the canvas for permanence, the glasses have functioned across her career as an armour of sorts - a visible boundary between her subjects and a world eager to read, categorise, and define them on sight. Some are angled toward the viewer with a reflective surface, so that looking at the work means, briefly, looking at yourself; others are turned away, holding their information in reserve.

The materials themselves carry their own histories. Fabric offcuts gathered from tailors and her sister's dressmaking shop, worn CDs and DVDs as an artefact of the shared laughter and tears from collective

watching of films and shows over the years; painstakingly prised open for the textured foil beneath, buttons, wire, and other salvaged objects all find their way into the glasses and the surrounding canvas. A working method that traces directly back to a resourceful, improvised studio practice, when materials to hand had to become the materials of the work - evidence of her unfailing curiosity about the world around her. That instinct for reinvention has stayed with Emefiele even as her studio, and her ambitions, have grown.

Behind the Glass traces how this single motif has shifted and transformed across the arc of Emefiele's career and extends the idea of "glass" itself into multiple registers. There is the glass of the eyewear itself, and there is the glass of the gallery - the threshold crossed on stepping in from the street, into a world where the visitor is drawn into dialogue with the women in the paintings, each pair of glasses offering a small glimpse into an individual story even as it withholds the rest. What begins as a shield gradually becomes something more porous: a threshold rather than a wall, a surface that refracts rather than blocks - and, in places, one that reflects outright, catching the viewer's own likeness in its surface. The subjects extend an invitation of their own: to reflect on our own histories and life stories as we look at theirs. In this way, the works offer not only a portrait of the world that Emefiele has created, but also the chance to see ourselves mirrored in the stories of another.

Drawing on loans from private collections, *Behind the Glass* offers a wide ranging presentation of Emefiele's work to date, and an opportunity to see this evolution across paintings, textiles, and mixed media in a single space. Together, the works reveal an artist who has steadily expanded the visual vocabulary available for depicting Black womanhood in contemporary art, moving away from familiar tropes of vulnerability and spectacle, toward something more guarded, self-possessed, and generous.

Curated by Curator and writer Pájú Oshin, the exhibition is accompanied by a programme of public talks and events. This exhibition is in dialogue with a second exhibition open at Gallery rosenfeld becoming *Behind the Glass: A Longing For home*.