

From Ancient Braids to Contemporary Fades

Stanley Emeka Onah

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In his third solo exhibition titled, *From Ancient Braids to Contemporary Fades*, Onah presents a series of new paintings reflecting on how Black hairstyling has represented a historical archive of Black history. Beyond the aesthetic appearance, hairstyling has defined poignant moments in history and continues to do so in present day. This in turn has made Black hair a record of identity, survival, migration, resistance and creativity.

Developed over the course of more than a year, this body of work draws upon research through both primary and secondary sources. Onah carried out interviews, consulted online archives and visited libraries to undertake research. Notable books that informed his thinking included *Hair in African Art and Culture* by Roy Sieber, Frank Herreman and Niangi Batulukisi and *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* by Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, alongside a wealth of visual and historical references tracing the evolving symbolism of Black hair across centuries.

Across thirteen paintings and four resin sculptures, Onah invites viewers to journey through time from ancestral Africa to the present day, exploring how hair has functioned as a communication tool, a marker of identity, an expression of creativity and a symbol of resistance. Working with oil paint and oil pastels, he cultivates a surface that feels raw and tactile, echoing the physicality of hair itself. The works follow a striking palette of red, blue, and yellow, the three primary colours, to suggest how hair represents a primary root of Black history, much like these colours form the foundation of all others in colour theory.

Each painting transports the viewer to a distinct moment. In *1968 (2025)*, a young woman with an Afro sits in a salon chair, book in hand. She reads *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver's seminal text. Her steady gaze meets ours, as though caught mid-thought. The image is an emblem of the 1960s Black Power movement, when the Afro became synonymous with Black pride and protest.

Another painting, *1990 (2025)*, takes us to the late 1980s where a young man reclines in his chair, headphones on, his high-top in full view. Bathed in warm yellow light, he drifts into the soundscape of the era, a clue to which is provided by the poster that adorns the wall behind him. The image embodies a generation expressing itself through rhythm, beat, and style.

Onah moves fluidly between centuries. A solemn blue-toned portrait, *1849 (2025)* recalls the mid-19th century, depicting a shaven-headed figure and a barcode, a haunting symbol of commodification during slavery. Slave traders and enslavers often shaved the heads of enslaved Africans to dehumanise them and strip away their identity. In closely related *1788 (2025)*, a braided woman is framed against a map of the Atlantic Ocean, with red dots tracing the many lives lost during the journey across the Middle Passage. Here, the cane

rows double as symbolism for signifying one's native region of origin and survival across the Atlantic.

In *1927* (2025), the scene bursts with energy. A well-dressed man dances beneath the sign of the 1920s New York City nightclub, the Cotton Club. He sports a conk hairstyle, a product of assimilation following the abolition of slavery. It reflects both pride and compromise amid the Harlem Renaissance, an era alive with music, literature, and new expressions of self. Sheet music from W.C. Handy's St. Louis Blues drifts across the visual plain paying homage to the Jazz Age.

Onah also looks further back, perhaps to the 13th century in *1296* (2025), honouring the intricate hairstyles of the Fulani people. A woman stands proud, her coiffure rising high, surrounded by symbols of millet, cattle skulls, calabashes and huts, all referencing the richness of Fulani culture. A recurring helix motif, present in a number of the works, symbolises alpha keratin, the very protein that forms hair, effectively connecting ancient traditions with biological truth.

Throughout the series, roughly painted borders frame the works like vintage posters, echoing both salon advertisements and propaganda imagery, and underscoring how hairstyles carry messages that can be easily propagated. In one painting, *Guardian of the Fontanel* (2025), Onah experiments with comic book-like panels, unfolding sequences of images that invite viewers to piece together layered narratives.

The four resin sculptures extend the related paintings into the three dimensions field. Each sculpture adorned with African inspired facial markings, grounding contemporary forms in ancestral roots, while allowing viewers to walk around and encounter each hairstyle from every angle.

Through this new series of works, Onah offers more than a visual timeline, he constructs a living archive. One that honours hair as heritage, history and hope.

About Stanley Emeka Onah

Stanley Emeka Onah (b.1984) is a British-Nigerian visual artist based in London, UK. Primarily a figurative painter, his work can be described as a visual commentary on universal themes faced by humanity, often using colour as a means to evoke or enhance the response to the work and texture to elevate it beyond the two-dimensional surface. His artistic practice began later in life but he has exhibited in institutions such as the Royal Academy of Arts. He has held a number of solo exhibitions and his work has been acquired by several private collections.

Solo Exhibitions: *FROM ANCIENT BRAIDS TO CONTEMPORARY FADES*, PM/AM Gallery, London, UK (2025); *MOURNING OF KIN*, Adorn the Common, London, UK (2024); *ALTERED STATE*, KRAFT, London, UK (2023).

Group Exhibitions: Adorn the Common Summer Art Fair, London, UK (2024); Crawley Summer Exhibition, Crawley, West Sussex, UK (2024); Affordable Art Fair Hampstead (CBC Stand), London, UK (2024); Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition, London, UK (2023); Affordable Art Fair Hampstead (CBC Stand), London, UK (2023); Aesthetica, Holy Art Gallery, London, UK (2022).