

**CHRIS OFILI** Not many painters in history can claim to have changed our very sense of what a painting can look like. Chris Ofili is among these few. Sometime in the mid-1990s Ofili invented an altogether unprecedented yet utterly enjoyable and confident form of painting, surprising us all by proving that painting can still be young, relaxed, seductive, and grand, even now, after all these long, dusty centuries. With Ofili it is as if painting, the wheezing and battered old wreck, has not only arisen from its death bed, but has been miraculously reborn as a twenty-year-old rapper, or a provocative, fertile love queen. 000 Monumental in scale, Ofili's paintings are intensely labored, with intricate details of colorful dots of acrylic and oil paints, collaged images, glitter, and pins forming vast, hallucinogenic patterns sunk into layers of glossy resin. They work like maps: from up close the viewer is lost in vein-like roads of swirls and vines and stars, all flowing over tiny magazine cutouts of porn close-ups or eyes and heads. From a distance it all resolves into a vast, line-drawn continent of an ample black goddess or super-hero, massive profile or magical animal, or an all-over geography of decoration and perspective. Shiny clumps of elephant dung are dotted on top of the picture, punctuating nodal points of the image like cities on a map; these same sturdy dung balls prop up the whole shimmering canvas, like crude, prehistoric wheels ready to transport this universe back to the mythological place from which it seems to have come. 000 Chris Ofili's mosaic-like paintings blissfully sweep aside the whole history of conventional art opposites—abstraction/figuration, high/low, sacred/profane—by ignoring or combining these all at once with painterly precision, assured draftsmanship, and maddening ease. Added to this is the work's overt, sometimes shocking insistence on the subject of race; like a black man telling a racist joke, Ofili (who is British, born of Nigerian parents) leaves his captive audience feeling entertained, bewildered, and guilty all at the same time. Are Ofili's blaxploitation-era aesthetics, thick-lipped personages, and mainstream pop idols like Muhammed Ali, Lil' Kim, and Diana Ross, not to mention the stereotypically black artistic persona he delivers (the artist as pimp, witch doctor, criminal, aboriginal dreamer, and hip-hop aficionado) meant to ridicule and accuse common notions of blackness, or celebrate difference? One suspects that this too becomes another set of opposites that lose all currency and usefulness in front of Ofili's deliriously unpreachy works. Certainly the sophistication of Ofili's titles (*Afromantics*; *Captain Shit and the Legend of the Black Stars*; *Elephantastic*), as layered in their language as the painting's very surface, belie a knowingness that cancels out the work's potential naïveté. 000 If painting has never died it is because of the pleasure that artists have derived for centuries from the act of painting: the whole messy, sexy, toxic labor of it all. Any pleasure-giving, addictive habit will never go out of fashion or run out of eager new initiates—as any pornographer, card-shark, or drug dealer can confirm. "Anybody who spends twelve hours a day with paint has got to get off on it; that's what I'm trying to give back, a love of painting" the artist has said. Ultimately, it is the immense, living exuberance with which Ofili has filled and layered his paintings that makes them so important, so intensely beautiful and alive. 000 Gilda Williams

Born in Manchester (United Kingdom) in 1968, lives and works in London  
Selected One Person Exhibitions: 2002 – Victoria Miro Gallery, London 000 2001 – "Watercolours", Gallery Side 2, Tokyo 000 1999 – "Afrobiotics", Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York 000 1998 – Southampton City Art Gallery, Southampton, United Kingdom (travelling to Serpentine Gallery, London) 000 1997 – "Pimpin ain't easy but it sure is fun", Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin 000 1996 – "Affrodizzia", Victoria Miro Gallery, London  
Selected Group Exhibitions: 2002 – "Cavepainting", Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica, California; "Live is Beautiful", Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom 000 2001 – "Public Offerings", Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; "Form Follows Fiction", Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy; "Painting at the Edge of the World", Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota 000 2000 – Sydney Biennial, Australia 000 1999 – "Carnegie International", Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; 6th International Istanbul Biennial, Turkey; "Trouble Spot Painting", Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp, Belgium 000 1997 – "Sensation: Young British Artists from The Saatchi Collection", Royal Academy of Arts, London (travelling to Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York) 000 1995 – "Brilliant! New Art from London", Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota  
Selected Bibliography: 2000 – Paul D. Miller, "Deep Shit, An Interview with Chris Ofili", *Parkett*, n.58; Lynn MacRitchie, "Ofili's Glittering Icons", *Art in America*, January 000 1999 – Colin Gleadell, "Ofili on a Roll", *Artnews*, December; Howard Halle, "Dung Deal", *Time Out New York*, 11 November 000 1998 – Stuart Shave, "Chris Ofili", *I-D*, September 000 1997 – Terry R. Myers, "Chris Ofili, Power Man", *Art/text*, n.58 000 1996 – Louisa Buck, "Openings: Chris Ofili", *Artforum*, September

1. *Afromantics*, 2000–2002, Acrylic, oil, glitter, polyester resin, map pins, and elephant dung on linen, 8 x 6 feet, 244 x 183 cm
2. *Captain Shit and the Legend of the Black Stars*, 1996, Acrylic, oil, resin, paper collage, glitter, map pins, and elephant dung on canvas, 8 x 6 feet, 244 x 183 cm
3. *Affrodizzia* (2nd version), 1996, Acrylic, oil, resin, paper collage, glitter, map pins, and elephant dung on canvas, 8 x 6 feet, 244 x 183 cm

1., 2.

