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Trans-Everything: Njideka Akunyili Crosby Mounts Two Shows in Los Angeles

By [Andrew Russeth](#) Posted 09/29/15 10:00 am

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Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *5 Umezebi Street, New Haven, Enugu*, 2012.

MAX YAWNEY/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TILTON GALLERY, NEW YORK/COLLECTION OF CRAIG ROBINS

One morning in mid-August, during a break from work in her Los Angeles studio, the artist [Njideka Akunyili Crosby](#) got to talking about Nigeria, where she grew up and lived until college. “I’m fascinated by those points where we have taken something inherited and run with it and found a way to make it our own,” she said by telephone, “either by exaggerating it or paring it down or creating a hybrid with something else.”

Akunyili Crosby, who is 32, was referring to fashion, design, and even religion in her home country, but her own artworks are also glorious examples of that improvisational mixing. She makes vibrantly colored paintings on paper with charcoal, acrylic, and dense tangles of photographs that she transfers to the paper so intricately that they take the form of fabric or even skin. Amalgams of painting, collage, and drawing, these pictures are bracingly intimate. In one self-portrait she leans over to kiss her husband, who is naked on top of a bed; in another her family lounges in a living room, papered photographs forming the floor, a wall, and some of their clothes.

“It feels as if you’re looking onto a scene from a movie or peering into the private lives of people,” said Jamillah James, the organizer of two museum shows of Akunyili Crosby’s work in L. A. this fall—a display of new paintings that opened at [Art+Practice](#) last month titled “The Beautiful Ones” and a survey of her recent work that opens October 3 at the [Hammer Museum](#), where James is an assistant curator. “They feel very private, but they’re also very immediate.” Histories and cultures blur in Akunyili Crosby’s work. The collages she embeds in her autobiographical tableaux include family snapshots but also advertisements from the 1970s and ’80s as well as photographs that date back to the colonial period in Nigeria. Making a composition, she typically begins with photographs—ones she either shoots herself or finds—and uses them as the basis for drawings that lead to the paintings. One new work is based on a vintage image of her older sister dressed in a white dress for her Catholic confirmation, accompanied by a doll with Caucasian features that is manufactured by a Ghanaian company. “I do all of these mixes so that when you are in front of it you, the viewer, are being placed in this transcultural, trans-everything space,” she told me, adding that she is always on the lookout for “things that point to the convoluted but interesting and beautiful histories that come out of post-colonial countries.”

But as much as Akunyili Crosby seems bravely willing to expose her own life and milieu in her art, she was clear that she has her limits. “I have a photograph of myself during my first Holy Communion, but I refuse to paint that,” she said, laughing, “because I look like a cake—crazy, poofy sleeves and pink ribbon.” Nevertheless, if you look closely at a few of her pieces, you can still spot the image, hovering in the background, providing a reference for something else.

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