

## *Infinite Essence*



Mikael Chukwuma Owunna (b. 1990) is a Nigerian-Swedish American photographer, Fulbright Scholar and engineer. His work explores the relationship between engineering, optics, the black body and queerness. Owunna imagines new universes and realities for marginalized communities around the globe.

Owunna's work has exhibited across Asia, Europe and North America and has been featured in media ranging from the New York Times, CNN, NPR, and VICE to The Guardian. He has lectured about his work at venues including Harvard Law School, World Press Photo (Netherlands), Sveriges Radio (Sweden) and a TEDx talk. His first published monograph, *Limitless Africans*, was released in 2019.

Owunna speaks English, French and basic Mandarin Chinese.

**“INFINITE ESSENCE** is my response to pervasive media images of black people dead and dying. Being gunned down by police officers, drowning and washing up on the shores of the Mediterranean, starving and suffering in award-winning photography. The trope of the black body as a site of death is everywhere.

What if the only images you saw of people who looked like you were dead and dying bodies? How would that affect the way you move through the world, how would that enter (and hamper) your body?

I've set about on a quest to recast the Black body as the cosmos and eternal," Owunna explains on his website. "I hand-paint the models' bodies with fluorescent paints, and using my engineering background I have augmented a standard flash with an ultraviolet bandpass filter, to only pass ultraviolet light. Using this method, in total darkness, I click down on the shutter—'snap'—and for a fraction of a second, their bodies illuminate as the universe. We view the beauty of the soul and our deeper cosmic connections communicated through them.

In Igbo spirituality, *odinani* [native to the region of southeastern Nigeria], we believe in the existence of a "chi" in every person. So just as you are seated reading this and I am here, speaking to you through the page, on the spiritual plane, our spirits, our chis are also convening together. Ultraviolet light is not visible to the human eye, and so we can illuminate and find – albeit temporarily – the unseeable therein, the soul, the chi. It is on this plane of existence where, regardless of our experiences of oppression on the physical plane, we are infinite.

As infinite as the universe, and the stardust that forms every fiber of our beings. Infinite Essence.

The work is printed on metal – aluminum – to reflect on millennia of West African metallurgy traditions and to connect the sitters to the ancestors. The reflective, glossy surface reflects the viewer into this trans-generational conversation, while the fragility of the material meditates on the fragility of the black body and the murders of black children like Tamir Rice (12), Aiyana Stanley-Jones (7), Trayvon Martin (17) and Antwon Rose Jr. (17).

The origin of the series's name comes from a quote by Chinua Achebe discussing *Odinani* (traditional Igbo spirituality) and the concept of "chi." In his exploration of "chi" and seeking to define it for a contemporary audience - Achebe found more questions than answers. But in his exploration, one line in particular stood out:

"Or is chi an infinitesimal manifestation of Chukwu's infinite essence given to each of us separately and uniquely, a single ray from the sun's boundless radiance?"

Similarly, I have started this series with more questions than answers. But with each click of my camera working to decipher a bit more of the puzzle of this blessing of life in the black body."

Lasallian Reflection is developed by the Lasallian Formation for Mission Team.

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