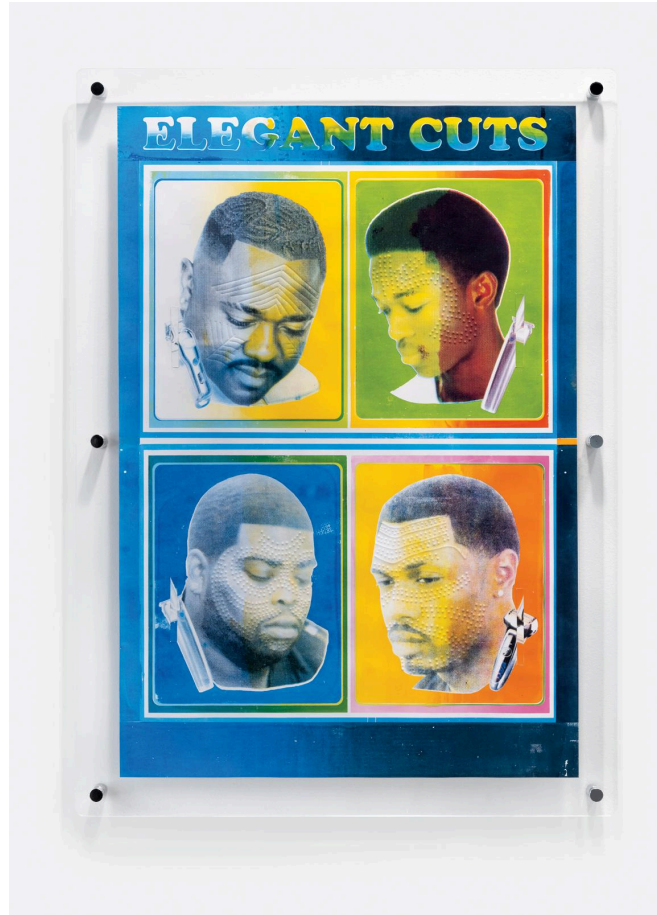




ARTFORUM



Africanus Okokon, Elegant Cuts (Skin Fade), 2024, embossed and debossed silk screen on paper with floating acrylic frame, 40 x 29".

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IAN BOURLAND | NOVEMBER 24

Africanus Okokon's exhibition "Touch Products" offered an array of multimedia works that were suffused with the ambiguities of memory, the diasporic experience, and the fragmentary jump cuts of a technological peripateticism to which most of us can relate. Yet the show felt distinctly personal. The presentation's title alluded to a line of cleaning supplies common in Ghana, where Okokon's mother grew up (his father was born in Nigeria, but the artist was raised in Wisconsin). Sculptures with motifs drawn from the art of the Asante people (including a broad-faced Akuaba fertility figure) were juxtaposed against silk-screen prints based on the colorful posters of men sporting different hairstyles that one can find plastered to barbershop walls throughout West Africa. One such example was *Elegant Cuts (Skin Fade)* (all works 2024), featuring a quartet of guys parading their handsome coifs. A makeshift stand on the facing wall, *Breadwinner* displays a large



advertisement for Aroma brand rice, an apparent *décollage* of signage that Okokon brought back from Accra in a suitcase.

The elements comprising these works, however, are deceptively quotidian. *Elegant Cuts* is a bespoke mash-up of tropes rather than a wholesale appropriation. The faces in this piece were embossed after being printed with the types of ritualistic scarification that used to appear on the bodies of people in sub-Saharan Africa (one can find these markings in the wooden visages of much precolonial figuration). For all its weathered verisimilitude, the Aroma ad is a careful montage of old and new printing. A picture of a serving bowl brims over not with broken rice but with bundles of foreign money watched over by a snake that vomits currency—a figure of urban legend and internet hoaxes that promises effortless riches. If there is an allegory here, it remains ambiguous, multivalent. What does snap into focus is the perceptual sphere that emerges between the atavism of belief—or the accelerationism of digital cultures—that is as fragmented and as globalized as Aroma itself.

Many viewers were drawn to the four vintage naval chests—and their accompanying hanging reliefs—respectively titled *Nsibidi Loops (Plenty Money)*; *Bonny and Blithe, Good and Gay, Second Contact (Participation)*; and *Second Contact (Cage of Brass)*. The chests are of the type that could often be seen along the nineteenth-century colonial routes between England and what was then called the Gold Coast of West Africa. They also make handy *boites-en-valise* for the totemic objects within—amalgamations based on kitsch trophies and more museum-worthy pieces, such as a set of Akuaba weights, once used for measuring gold dust. Brass-cast by artisans in the traditional manner, these objects seem denuded of the specific potency of their precursors, yet are invested with new value via the art-world context. More powerful was a quartet of salvaged Panasonic Viera flat-screen TVs: *End Your Picture*; *Flash of Light, or Darkness*; *Heavenly Bodies*; and *Vide et Crede*. At first glance, they seem like so much of the garbage that ends up in the industrially polluted outskirts of Accra itself (which itself embodies a look that’s been aesthetically repurposed in the Global North as “vaporwave chic”). But the alluring traces of images seemingly burned onto their screens, including a CNN logo, are actually contact-printed cyanotypes—the province of naturalists or analogue revivalists.

The old-fashioned photographic enlarger and antique chemistry Okokon used to create these prints resulted in images at once debased and abstract: a figure in a dense forest, a snippet from a television show, a shadowy outline. What they’re attempting to say seems inscrutable—trying to decode them is like reading a gothic Rorschach test. When I talked with the artist, he assured me that each of these four works was laden with meaning: missives from his own mnemonic atlas. Although the cyanotypes imbue degraded matter with beauty, the sculptures keep their secrets intact. They are emblematic of Okokon’s broader approach, which adumbrates a nomadic, boundaryless life.



Bourland, Ian. “Africanus Okokon.” *Artforum*, vol. 63 no. 3, Nov. 2024.