NNENNA OKORE
Ukwa RuO Oge Ya Q Daa
There's a time for everything
Unleashed (detail), 2017. Newspaper, acrylic paint and wire, 366 x 457 x 69 cm.
In nature, everything has its due time. Although man often tries to manipulate, mould, and sometimes even force nature to succumb to an altered schedule, nature holds fast to its predetermined moment for each and everything, even if the timing seems capricious. It is the cyclical process of birth, growth, decay, and eventual renewal conducted by nature and which is sometimes seemingly interrupted or aggravated by humans that Nnenna Okore explores in her show *Ukwa Ruo Oge Ya O Daa - There’s a time for everything*. Both through her sculptures and the creative processes behind them, Okore underscores the balance between development and decline, preservation and the ephemeral, and the life and death that is inherent in the natural world.

Okore, who has made reclaiming and repurposing the foundation of her practice, breathes new life into her materials. Employing less clay, an element common to many of the pieces included in her debut (*Ulukububa – Infinite Flow*, 2008) and second (*Metamorphoses*, 2011) solo shows at October Gallery, the artist continues to work with string, burlap, paper, and wire, while expanding her family of sinuous materials to include cheesecloth in her latest creations. Okore’s transformation of mundane matter into lithe forms is visually and conceptually at odds with the dense and compact shapes that are often associated with modern industrial means of recycling. Her actions highlight the fact that renewal need not be a mechanized action practiced on a large scale, but rather a means to tap into nature’s intrinsic method of transformation available to each and every one of us.

*Ukwa Ruo Oge Ya O Daa* is Okore’s assertion of her Igbo heritage and upbringing, and the lens through which she views and experiences life from her home in Chicago, Illinois. *Ukwa Ruo Oge Ya O Daa* is the proverbial Igbo axiom that references the...
theatrical plunging of the breadfruit from the mother tree as it reaches maturity. According to the artist, the plummet of the tropical fruit not only indicates a climax of the ripening phase, it also sparks the genesis of a new trajectory – the decaying phase.

The works in the show can be roughly divided into four groups or chapters, which call to mind terminology such as the seed, the flowering, the remains, and the decay. Like everything else in nature, these are not strict categories, but unfolding phases that morph into each other, blurring the line between one moment in time and the next.

Okore begins her trajectory with works like Deeply Rooted. Slowly breaking free from its compressed form, the sculpture offers a suggestion of the continued unfolding that is to come. One observes the piece’s varying tones, albeit subtle. The human audience must wait patiently for nature’s gifts. Okore’s title alludes to what man cannot see below the surface – the ties that forever connect the artist to her Igbo origins and the roots that ground nature’s offerings, which physically and symbolically anchor them as they transform into subsequent formations.

In works such as Here and Now and Ihe Di Ife (Living things), Okore mesmerizes us with her quotations of nature’s beauty. The works resemble graceful flower blossoms, which become increasingly semi-transparent as they expand out from the center. The sculptures consist of layers of petals fashioned from cheesecloth, string, and wire. The creations extend through space and time. Ethereal Beauty reminds the viewer that nature’s brilliance is not just for our fancy, but part of a larger system of what the artist refers to as cosmic balance and planetary order.

Beauty is fleeting. Nature draws us in seductively, and retreats, unrelentingly ephemeral. In Things that Meet the Eye and On the Long Run, Okore underscores nature’s cruel transience. The natural world is onto the next phase before we are ready. The artist plays with her forms and her titles, presenting us...
with more than we often want to acknowledge. In Things That Meet the Eye, Okore gives that which our eye doesn’t normally see or desire to see – the root exposed, extracted in man’s attempt to capture nature’s beauty at its peak. In On the Long Run, there is no longevity. Nature has already started to take back what it temporarily shared with us. The natural world’s vibrant colours, as offered through Okore’s sculptures, fade until all we have is to reflect on the Resonance of what was once in bloom.

While humans dwell on the loss of beauty, nature channels its effort into its next phase – the decay. Okore offers deterioration in its most aesthetically pleasing form in Unleashed. Just as nature works to propel its blossom onward and upward from the roots beneath the surface, so does the artist pour energy into this twisting and turning piece that breaks free from its previous reality as a delicate flower. This is not the end, but merely an ending to this cycle. It is the pretext to renewal and regeneration.

While the natural world is universal, Okore has chosen the breadfruit as her microcosm for this artistic examination. In Nigeria, the breadfruit, or Treculia africana, is a common food for the Igbo people. The fruits can grow as large as a volleyball and weigh up to eight kilos. The tree, itself, can reach a height of 20 to 30 metres. The plunging of the breadfruit to the ground is dramatic and repeated again and again, as a single tree can yield up to 200 fruits. Man does not pick the fruit; instead, the tree chooses to discharge its bounty, one by one, at will. Both for its abundance and its unpredictable series of releases, the tree commands respect. According to Okore, it is this preordained destiny of the breadfruit’s life cycle, as it plummets to the ground at its peak ripeness, and the prerogative of nature, versus man, to determine that moment that she strives to explore and encapsulate in this latest body of production.

Here and Now, 2017.
Cheesecloth, jute string, dye and wire, 209 x 203 x 33 cm.