

Efie Gallery



SLAWN
ARTIST ESSAY 2022



SLAWN | ON A DARKER NOTE

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To understand Slawn's impact is to think about the ways in which he is a self-proclaimed "internet child". He has grown up collecting an amalgamation of references, and denying previously prescribed notions of high or low culture. Anything goes on the internet. But he has also developed an avid community, one that has watched him develop from the beginnings of his career as a purely graffiti artist, to a multimedia artist attempting to build his skillset, incorporating more mediums, interrogating his own place within art history.

The Slawn Club has played an integral role in his standing as an artist; it is a community of people from across backgrounds that have supported his work. But they have also contributed to his own brand of artist. He has somehow managed to combine the internet world with real-life impact. He has a community that likes his posts and views his stories but they also show up to his performances, where he might engage in a sort of fight club, or lead a procession to Saatchi gallery, or hand out shoes outside Alara Lagos. He calls, they follow. He is the artist at the centre of it all.

It is no wonder then that this exhibition of 12 new works focuses on clowns. They are notorious tricksters, used for entertainment across centuries and borders, but always in on the joke. Slawn has often called himself a "scam artist"—he is aware that he is walking a fine line between the traditional art and entertainment world. And in this new body of work, he explores what it means to be creating the joke and forming a key part of it. What does it mean for a black man to be the butt of the joke? What does it mean for a black man to be a source of entertainment? Is there a way to subvert that power dynamic, and for the black artist to present the entertainment and choose the ways in which others perceive him? To be in on the joke? The answer is unclear, but Slawn asks those questions in this exhibition.

In almost all the paintings, the subjects avoid the gaze of the viewer. At times they are cross-eyed, other times they look away in mischief, with wide closed-teeth smiles and bulging red lips. Slawn's clowns are not as prepared for consumption as it might have initially seemed. The artist plays with colour in a way that we haven't previously seen. In *Bobo in Blue* (2022), he paints the jester against a bright sky-blue background. This is a rare instance of negative space in Slawn's work. His planes are usually swarming with action, economy is not normally part of his visual language.

So to see this optimistic blue, contrasting dramatically with the never-ending cherry tongue of the clown, feels like a trap. Slawn has often said that he wants his paintings to be as interesting to children as they might be to adults. This particular work will probably catch the eye of audience members across age brackets, but the closer one gets to it, the darker it seems. To some, the extended tongue might be reminiscent of the Rolling Stones record logo which in itself is-

a reference to the Hindu goddess Kali, who is often depicted biting her red tongue while sticking it out. It is supposedly a gesture of shame, perhaps of realising you've said something and gone too far. In this painting, the tongue stretches even beyond the plane. The clown widens its eyes but they never quite reach the gaze of the viewer.

The gold in this painting is a shade that he remembers from his childhood, on a school trip to the Point of No Return in Badagry, Nigeria. It is the location from which slaves were shipped onto various destinations on the transatlantic slave trade. It was here that Slawn first saw the rusting shackles, and this colour has stayed with him since. His choice to incorporate it into this painting is an important one— it is an admittance of the multi-layered nature of the work he is making. He lured us in with the bright colours, and now he is urging us to ask, is it really about clowns anymore?

Self Portrait (2022) is the most overtly political work in the show. It takes the imagery from clown to minstrel, from the circus to the Jim Crow South. White stars are dotted on the subject's face, as if he has been branded by stardom. The exaggerated red lips, the chocolate brown skin, the wildly raised eyebrows, these are all part of the imagery perpetuated in minstrel shows in the American south. These shows came to prominence in the early 19th century in America, mostly played by white actors in blackface with these accentuated features that they attributed to black people. These shows were a source of entertainment for white audiences, and here Slawn ruminates on his position within the art world, as entertainer and artist.

This series is a departure from Slawn's previous work in theme and in style. The trademarks of his mark-making remain, the short strokes and the caricature-adjacent characters, but in *On A Darker Note*, he is experimenting with heavier themes, and the paintings reflect that. They are more layered, oftentimes with scenes painted on top of one another. His use of acrylic in addition to his usual spray paint adds a depth to the planes, the texture of the paint is more prominent. In *Bolu* (2022), he uses his brushstrokes to literally blur the lines between abstraction and figuration. This exhibition is also about the artist growing as a painter, experimenting and testing the limits of the medium.

Ultimately with *On A Darker Note*, Slawn is allowing the audience to read as much or as little as they want into the imagery on show. It is an exhibition of juxtaposition and contradiction. Art vs entertainment, joking vs jokers, a so-called graffiti artist exhibiting in the Arab British Chamber of Commerce in Mayfair. Anyone can choose which side of the coin they choose to look at the show, which perspective they want to take on. But really it is a show about the range that painting affords the artist. It allows him to create the joke and also be the joke. Sometimes he verges on caricature, other times he leans towards abstraction. He is using the levity of the medium of spray paint to question darker themes such as the black artist as entertainer. At what cost? He seems to be asking. Or, it might just be a show about clowns.



GALLERY INFORMATION

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Opening Times:

Monday – Saturday | 11am – 7pm

Sunday - by appointment only

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