

Presented by Latcham Art Centre

Emmanuel Osahor
What we tend



FRIDAY, MAY 26 – SATURDAY, JULY 8, 2023

Front cover:

Emmanuel Osahor, *Since there are no other worlds*, 2022, oil on canvas, 90" x 44". Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nicolas Robert.

Emmanuel Osahor

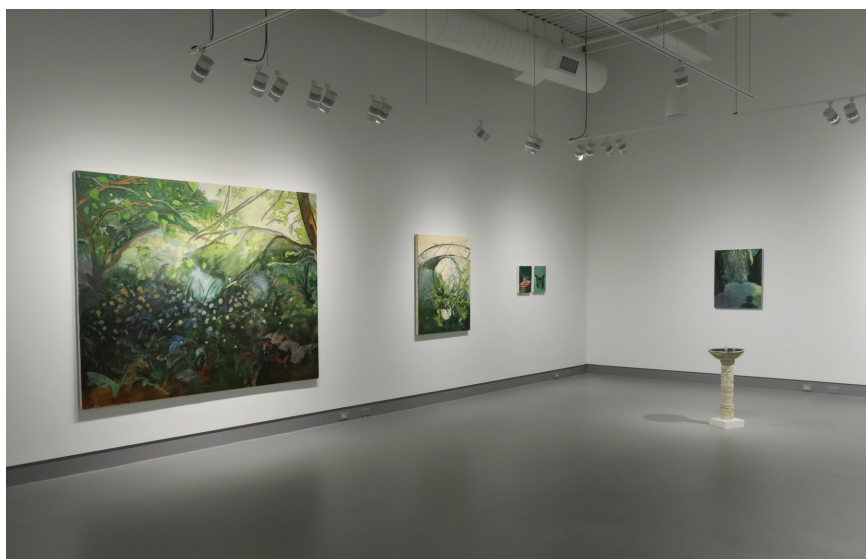
What we tend

Born in Nigeria and based in Toronto, Emmanuel Osahor's artwork engages with beauty as a necessity for survival and a precursor to thriving. For *What we tend*, the artist depicts gardens as carefully considered and intricate sanctuaries. His paintings and etchings embody a collage-like sensibility, drawing from various sources to create new yet convincing garden settings. Also featured are recent ceramic fountains, which moves the exhibition toward the immersive.

A Chair Outside

Each year in March, after spending the coldest months closed to the public, regional garden centres reopen their doors. By May, they're buzzing with gardeners, browsing with their flower beds and backyard sanctuaries in mind. As they explore the perennial greenhouses, they encounter meticulously grouped plants labeled with individualized tags, enabling them to better care for their chosen plants more effectively. In *What we tend*, Nigerian-born, Toronto-based artist Emmanuel Osahor focuses on this idea of care in the garden, presenting recent artworks that show backyards as places that are cultivated by care and hold a distinct power in their beauty.

Walking into Osahor's solo exhibition, the sound of murmuring water fills the space. Looking into the centre of the open room reveals the source: five handcrafted ceramic *Fountains* gurgle as they circulate water in their basins. Standing just over half a metre tall with pale textured exteriors and contrasting colourful glazed interiors, they add an auditory element to the exhibition. Stepping further into the gallery, a suite of seven etchings in oak frames line the west wall. Recently acquired by the Canada Council Art Bank, these printworks introduce visitors to backyard settings that resemble carefully drawn domestic landscapes, though their making was much more complex than simply putting pencil to paper. *Lilacs for Farah* (2022) shows a



Installation view of Emmanuel Osahor: *What we tend.*

hand-laid slate staircase, carving a path between shrubs. *Family Housing* (2022) shows a bed of long-stemmed flowers (maybe tulips) in their prime, set against a brick building that is mostly hidden by foliage. In all the etchings, though there are traces of people around, plant life takes centre stage. The remainder of the gallery, the majority, holds ten oil paintings that range in scale from intimate to larger than life. Some paintings depict backyard spaces – personal gardens that Osahor has captured and shared with visitors. Others present isolated backyard creatures, like *Blue Morpho* (2023), or *Feeder* (2023), which shows a tan moth perched on what might be a slice of mango. Other paintings take us to wilder gardens, maybe the edge of the woods, filled with ponds, silhouetted trees and fervent flowers blanketing warm, earthy ground. And the largest of the paintings – *To see the dawn* (2023), and *Since there are no other worlds*, (2022) – are so big that when standing within a metre of

the canvas, the beautiful backyards encompass all of your vision. Combined with the freestanding *Fountains*, the 2D works inch toward a calm, immersive experience.

Osahor takes inspiration for his paintings and etching from real life spaces: strangers gardens that he sees from afar on walks, and backyard sanctuaries of close friends that he has experienced more thoroughly. After collaging these images together physically or digitally, they act as preparatory sketches; they may contain fragments of specific sites, but when brought together, they become new spaces that don't exist in real life. Their specificity has been stripped, including any trace of the people who crafted them, but their beauty is magnified. When translating the preparatory works into paintings and printworks, the artist uses drawing to define form, guide viewers' eyes, and to fold together disparate spaces cohesively onto one surface. Charcoal-drawn or painted lines help retain the collage-like sensibility of the reference material, describing how the edges of the photographs can abruptly butt up against each other, or sometimes flow together seamlessly. Swaths of oil paint support this, too. In *Since there are no other worlds* (2022), a pond is described with beautifully washy and translucent paint, laid down like wax paper so viewers can see evidence of marks underneath. To the right of it stands a silhouetted tree trunk, an open shape that reveals the auburn underpainting like a cut out.

The works in *What we tend* only hint at specificity, rather than fully depicting realistic spaces. Trees stand tall in some artworks, but who can say if they're oaks or aspens? This degree of ambiguity and mystery allows viewers to interpret scenes as they see fit, with emotional responses that are not solely reliant on visual accuracy. They intentionally withhold photorealistic

detail to activate viewers memories to fill in the blanks. These tactics contribute to the perceived beauty of the artwork in ways that touch us personally, using emotion to amplify beauty.

For some gallery visitors and artists, the beauty of artwork is all there is, conceptually. But in a world brimming with beautiful things, what is the purpose of adding to that already vast collection? For Osahor, there are other important things to consider: what is all that beauty doing? What is its power?

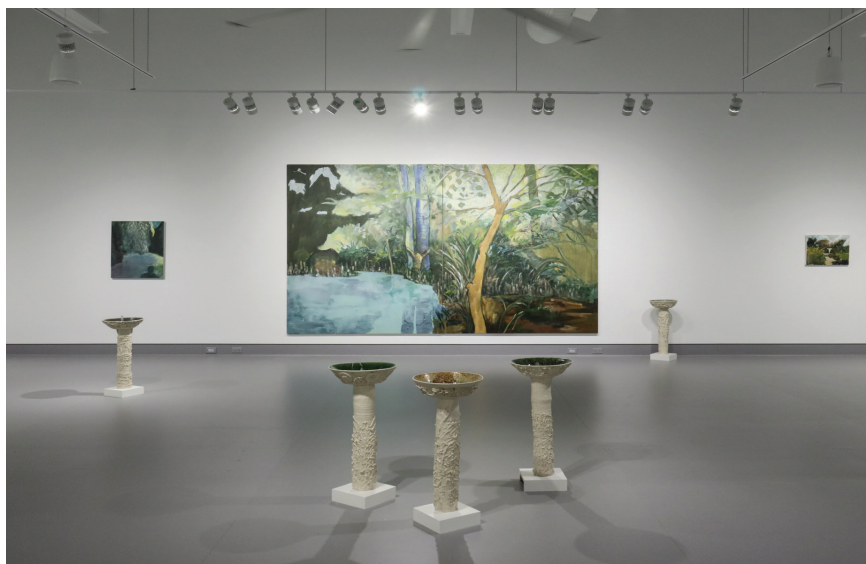
Osahor began to consider these questions after he moved to Edmonton from Lagos, Nigeria, in 2010, attending the University of Alberta. There he documented temporary shelters of unhoused populations along a stretch of the North



Left to right: Emmanuel Osahor, *Fish pond with lily pads*, 2022, etching (soft-ground, aquatint and sugar-lift) on archival paper, 21" x 25". Emmanuel Osahor, *Portal (Where do we go from here?)*, 2022, etching (soft-ground, aquatint and sugar-lift) on archival paper, 21" x 25".

Saskatchewan River that flows through Edmonton, called the River Valley.¹ This project revealed that marginalization and inequality are pervasive in Canada, despite being known abroad as having a high standard of living. These problems are deep-seeded and systemic here, as they are in many places around the world. At the same time, another peripheral project was taking shape: Osahor was documenting home gardens on his way to and from the encampment sites, almost unconsciously, and over time he realized they acted as emotional counterbalances to the anxiety inherent in his main project. Over the next several years, as Osahor graduated from the University of Alberta and began pursuing a Master of Fine Art at the University of Guelph, he began to draw on critical theory that supported the effects of gardens he had felt in real life.

In her book *On Beauty and Being Just*, American author Elaine Scarry details her theory of how beauty emboldens people toward real acts of care. Briefly, she argues that when we experience something beautiful – a piece of art, a fellow human, a backyard in bloom – we can desire to focus on it, replicate it and be moved to protect it, to preserve the beauty.² While we may feel guilty for focusing on something beautiful and seemingly superficial instead of facing the world's conflicts head on, Osahor and Scarry position beauty as necessary, not frivolous. Tending to beauty can remind us that so much more than trauma exists. In recent years, trauma stories like the tragic death of George Floyd in Minneapolis have amplified pressures and injustices on marginalized communities.³ Increased anxiety naturally followed for many, and for some, trauma stories like this psychologically bind with these communities. But in Osahor's words, "the foregrounding of trauma...negates the fullness of experience of marginalized people, including and especially



Installation view of Emmanuel Osahor: *What we tend.*

our capacity for hope, beauty and the reality of our tremendous resilience in the face of oppression.”⁴ Amid the amplification of injustices on marginalized communities, Osahor’s beautiful work counterbalances that negativity back toward delight and fullness of experience for marginalized people, while reminding us that we all have the capacity to practice care for one another. Each painting and print shows places where care has been practiced – beautiful training grounds for building moral values needed for a better, more equitable society. In this way, the care we practice in gardens can translate into something transformative, and his exhibition becomes an invitation to reconsider the familiarity of the backyard garden, finding power in beauty.

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Footnotes

1. Osahor, Obinamaka Emmanuel. "For a Moment." MFA Thesis paper in support of the exhibition: *For a Moment*. University of Guelph, 2021, pp. 8.
2. Scarry, Elaine. "Part 1." *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1999, pp. 3–53, <https://criticaltheory-consortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/On-Beauty-Part-1.pdf>. Accessed 25 May 2023.
3. George Floyd's death sparked a resurgence in the Black Lives Matter movement and highlights the continued oppression of Black communities in the United States, Canada, and globally. The years following the COVID-19 pandemic, including the present moment, have seen increased acts of oppression for marginalized groups, including people of colour and Indigenous and 2SLGBTQ+ communities. This incomplete list highlights just a small number of inequities faced by marginalised communities.
4. Osahor, Obinamaka Emmanuel. "For a Moment." MFA Thesis paper in support of the exhibition: *For a Moment*. University of Guelph, 2021, pp. 27. Here, Emmanuel references American poet Ross Gay's publication, *The Book of Delights*, a collection of over 100 poems about delight.



Photo: Alexine McLeod

Emmanuel Osahor's practice engages with beauty as a necessity for survival and a precursor to thriving. Through a rigorously playful inquiry into materials and image making processes, his works depict garden spaces as complicated sanctuaries within which manifestations of beauty and care are present. Born in Nigeria, Emmanuel Osahor lives and works in Toronto. He holds an MFA in Studio Art from the University of Guelph (2021) and a BFA in Art and Design from the University of Alberta (2015). His work has been presented in multiple solo and group exhibitions, and is held in multiple collections. He is an Assistant Professor of Studio Art at the University of Toronto Scarborough. He is represented by Galerie Nicolas Robert.

The artist would like to thank The Canada Council for the Arts, Clay Space Studio.



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Latcham Art Centre inspires the community to engage with visual art through exhibitions of contemporary art and education programs including classes, workshops, artist talks and tours. It is funded by donations, sponsorships, membership and fundraising events as well as annual grants from the municipality of Whitchurch-Stouffville.

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