

The Hilton Als Series  
**Njideka Akunyili Crosby**

## The Hilton Als Series

The Yale Center for British Art (YCBA) presents a selection of six works by Njideka Akunyili Crosby (b. 1983), Yale MFA 2011, from September 22, 2022 through January 22, 2023. The exhibition will travel to the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, where it will be on view February 15 through June 12, 2023.

This is the third and final exhibition in a series curated by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Hilton Als in collaboration with the YCBA and each artist. Previous exhibitions featured works by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (2019) and Celia Paul (2018). Als's essays about the series will be published by the YCBA and Yale University Press in a forthcoming book.

**Hilton Als in conversation with Martina Droth,  
Deputy Director and Chief Curator, YCBA**

Tuesday, December 6, 2022, 5:30–6:30 PM

Yale Center for British Art  
Lecture Hall and Livestream

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please visit [britishart.yale.edu/exhibitions-programs](https://britishart.yale.edu/exhibitions-programs).

# Njideka Akunyili Crosby

In her ongoing series *The Beautiful Ones*, artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby takes as her subject children she came across in family albums, or observed and photographed on trips to her native Nigeria. The paintings — five of which are on view here, along with an earlier work that anticipated the series — are framed by vulnerability, hope, and a certain self-awareness. Inspired by the Ghanaian author Ayi Kweh Armah's classic 1968 novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, which centers on political and personal idealism and corruption, Akunyili Crosby's vibrant canvases are alive with, and to, her understanding of her various subjects' layered, complex, and vulnerable lives. Using acrylic paint, pastel, colored pencils, and photo transfers, Akunyili Crosby does not, in the end, achieve a single effect in a canvas. Indeed, her paintings present a world that is literally layered, and deeply committed to the depth to be found on the surfaces that make up intimate and private spaces, including the body. Akunyili Crosby's figures ask: How am I being read? How would you like to read me? Am I part of this world, or am I aspiring to the next? In short, how does a child come to be on this "new" continent?

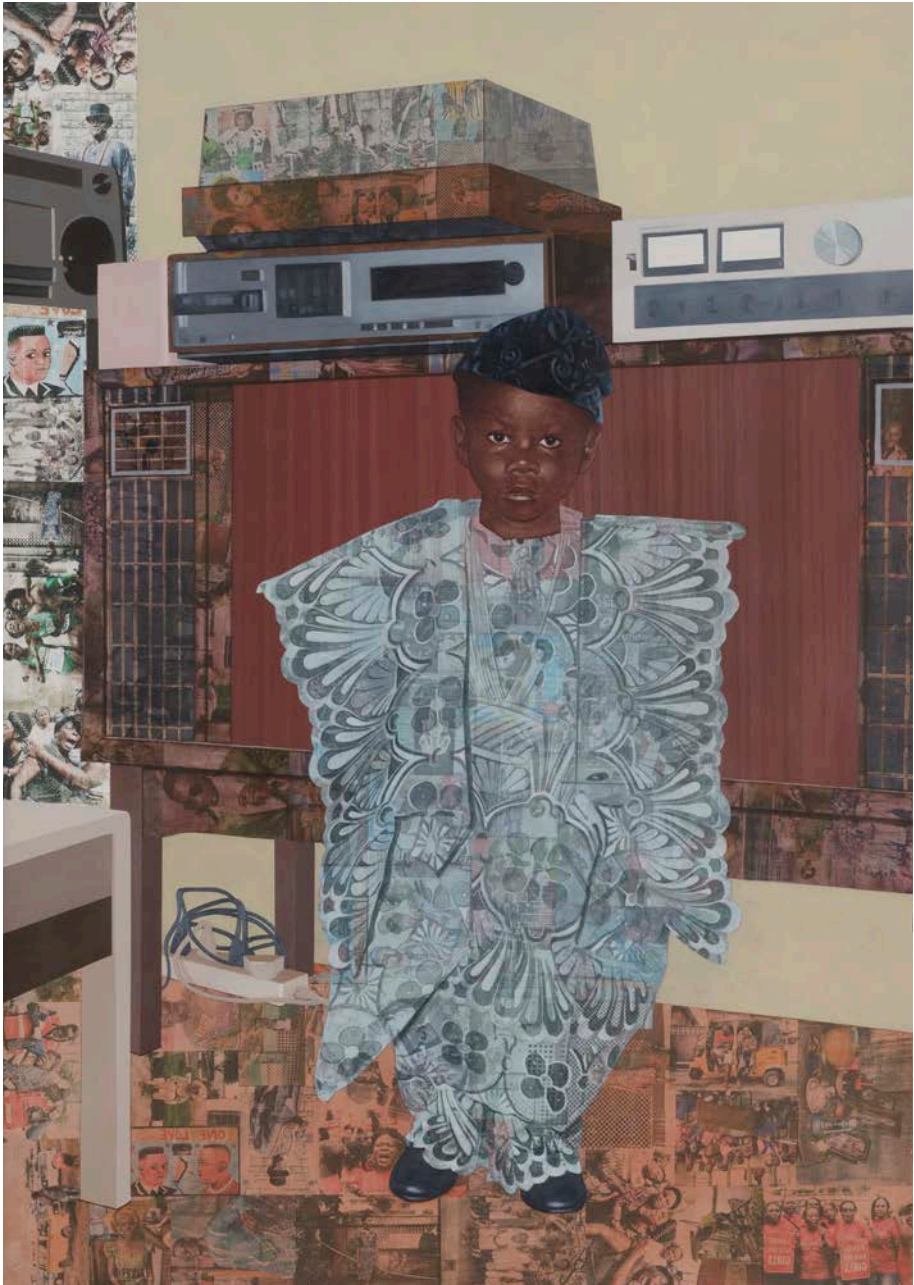
Akunyili Crosby, a poet of place, was born in Enugu, Nigeria, in 1983. At the age of sixteen, she emigrated to the United States. As an undergraduate, she attended Swarthmore College, where she studied biology and art. Eventually Akunyili Crosby decided to pursue art, and received a Master of Fine Art degree from Yale School of Art in 2011 before being chosen for the Studio Museum in Harlem's Artist-in-Residence program. A 2017 MacArthur Fellow, the artist now lives in Los Angeles. Throughout her career, Akunyili Crosby has continued to delve into the diasporic experience to communicate various ideas about the meaning to be found in being an outsider, and in belonging.

—HILTON ALS



"The Beautiful Ones" Series #1c





*"The Beautiful Ones" Series #8*

## **"The Beautiful Ones" Series #1c**

## **"The Beautiful Ones" Series #8**

(previous pages)

The girl and boy in *"The Beautiful Ones" Series #1c* and *"The Beautiful Ones" Series #8*, created in 2014 and 2018 respectively, are solitary figures who, as with Akunyili Crosby's other subjects, look directly at the viewer, less as an act of defiance than as a declaration of being. The subject in *"The Beautiful Ones" Series #1c* is on the brink of adolescence; her shoes are those of a girl who is too young for heels but too old for flats. Her transformation from girl to woman is echoed by the images making up her clothing. Akunyili Crosby sheathes this female character in images taken from African popular culture, mixing them with pictures that inspire her own work. Note the girl dressed for her confirmation on the upper right sleeve and near the subject's right shoulder; undoubtedly those photographs are the source material for the girl in *"The Beautiful Ones" Series #4*.

The boy in *"The Beautiful Ones" Series #8* is dressed like a miniature adult; his costuming and pose bring to mind Goya's portraits of royal or moneyed youth dressed in a child's version of adult splendor. One feels, in the weight of his hat, the crown of adult responsibility.

#### **"The Beautiful Ones" Series #4**

#### **"The Beautiful Ones" Series #6**

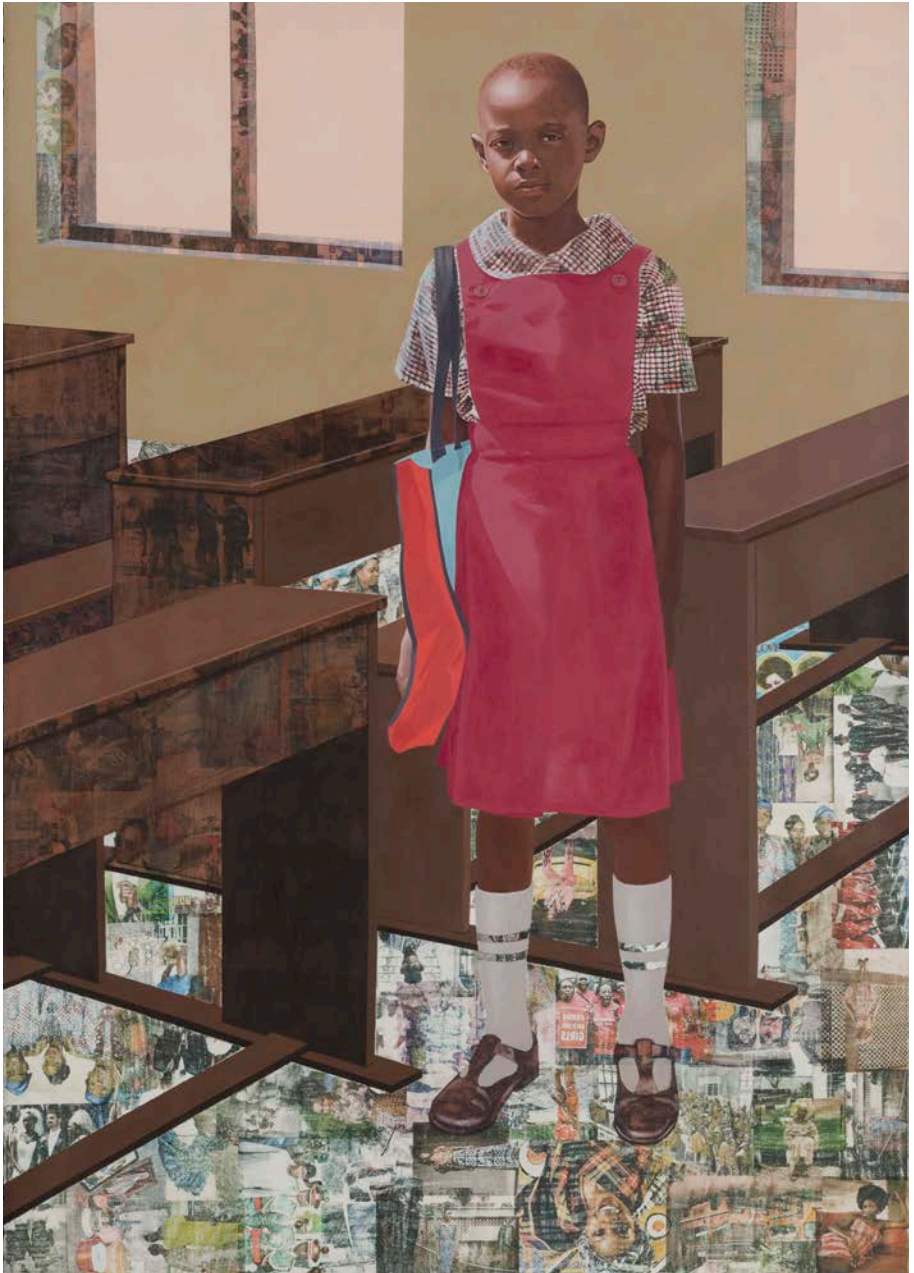
(following pages)

In *"The Beautiful Ones" Series #4* and *"The Beautiful Ones" Series #6*, Akunyili Crosby offers the viewer images of African girlhood blooming amid colonialism, terrorism, and loss. The whiteness of the subject's communion dress draws attention not only to her skin, but also to the very idea and reality of the power of Christianity and thus European religious influences on a non-European nation. And while white, of course, connotes purity and virginity, Akunyili Crosby's subject is surrounded by anything but; advertisements and beauty stories promoting European and North American ideas of glamour glut the immediate world of the frame, while a white doll, totem-like, stands close by. Similarly, the girl in the red school uniform in *"The Beautiful Ones" Series #6* is a single figure not immune to advertising or history. Indeed, among the images and stories at her feet is a headline about the Chibok schoolgirls who, in 2014, were kidnapped by Boko Haram, an extremist Islamist group.



*"The Beautiful Ones" Series #4*





*"The Beautiful Ones" Series #6*

## **"The Beautiful Ones" Series #9**

What sets *"The Beautiful Ones" Series #9*, a work from 2018, apart from the other paintings seen here is the artist's focus on children interacting with other children — a gathering of youth. In most of the images in the series, Akunyili Crosby's environments are vivid and alive with domestic architecture, which is to say her characters inhabit rooms and atmospheres that are made or constructed by adults but become transformed by the presence of youth, their height and scale, and their emotional presence. The oldest child in this work takes on the role of caretaker, while the speaker and audio equipment ground the room. The sharp lines of the modern console are in direct contrast to and with the children, whose relative softness reinforces their humanness.



*"The Beautiful Ones" Series #9*



*"The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born" Might Not Hold True For Much Longer*



## **“The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born” Might Not Hold True For Much Longer**

One striking aspect of this work — which anticipated the *“Beautiful Ones”* series — is how Akunyili Crosby frames her subject. She is not facing the artist and thus the audience, but looks toward a future that we cannot see. She may not be able to see it either, but it is there. Resting on the visual signs of her culture, which the artist has assembled into a rug, Akunyili Crosby’s subject, in this very quiet work, sits in a domestic space. The table is laden with objects that connote a recent repast. With her arms folded around her legs, Akunyili Crosby’s subject is relaxed, and is engaged by something she’s observing out of frame. Another frame, such as a television? A computer? Or some other aspect of modern visual life? Maybe she’s talking to another person. The mystery of engagement informs this work, and lies at the heart of all of Akunyili Crosby’s characters.



## Works in the exhibition

*"The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born" Might Not Hold True For Much Longer*, 2013  
[p10, p12 (detail)]

Acrylic and photographic transfers on paper, 64 x 82  $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (162.6 x 210.5 cm)

Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

Gift of Marjorie and Michael Levine

*"The Beautiful Ones" Series #1c*, 2014 [p2]

Acrylic, photographic transfers, and colored pencil on paper

61 x 42  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (154.9 x 107 cm)

Courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro, and David Zwirner

*"The Beautiful Ones" Series #4*, 2015 [p6]

Acrylic, photographic transfers, and colored pencil on paper

62 x 42  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (157.5 x 107 cm)

Private collection

*"The Beautiful Ones" Series #6*, 2018 [p7]

Acrylic, photographic transfers, and colored pencil on paper

59  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 42  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (151.8 x 108 cm)

Private collection

*"The Beautiful Ones" Series #8*, 2018 [p3]

Acrylic, color pencil, and transfers on paper

59  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 42 in. (152.1 x 106.7 cm)

Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

*"The Beautiful Ones" Series #9*, 2018 [cover (detail), pg]

Acrylic, photographic transfers, colored pencil, charcoal, and collage on paper

75 x 75  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (190.5 x 191.8 cm)

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford

Douglas Tracy Smith and Dorothy Potter Smith Fund

LEFT *"The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born" Might Not Hold True For Much Longer* (detail)

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