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MUSEUM OF ART  
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

# Artwork Information Sheet **46**

## OLAOLU SLAWN'S POLICE AND THEIR



Olaolu Slawn. *Police and Their*. Spray paint on canvas, 170cm x 170cm. Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University.

## INTRODUCTION

**O**laolu Slawn is one of the most dynamic emerging voices in contemporary African art. Rooted in the visual cultures of Lagos and shaped further by his experiences within London's urban environment, Slawn's work exists at the intersection of street aesthetics, satire, improvisation, and psychological expression. His paintings and drawings employ aggressive line work, distorted cartoon-like figures, fragmented symbolism, and monochromatic intensity to construct emotionally charged visual narratives that reflect the contradictions of contemporary life.

## THE ARTIST

Olaolu Slawn (b. 2000, Lagos, Nigeria) is a Nigerian contemporary artist, designer, and cultural provocateur currently living and working in London. Emerging from the visual and social energy of Lagos, Slawn developed his artistic sensibility within Nigeria's skate and street culture scene, particularly through his involvement with the pioneering skate collective and fashion platform Wafflesncream and the streetwear collective Motherlan, which he co-founded. These formative experiences profoundly shaped his artistic pedagogy as one rooted in spontaneity, improvisation, rebellion, and the democratization of visual culture. Rather than adhering to academic formalism, Slawn's practice embraces instinctive mark-making, graffiti aesthetics, caricature, satire, and the immediacy of street expression as tools for social commentary and emotional release.

After relocating to London in 2017 to study at Middlesex University, his work evolved into a highly recognizable visual language characterized by aggressive black line work, exaggerated figures, monochromatic palettes, and chaotic yet rhythmic compositions that merge elements of street art, Abstract Expressionism, Yoruba visual memory, and popular culture. His paintings frequently explore themes of identity, race, urban life, mythology, and the absurdities of contemporary society.

Slawn gained international attention during the London lockdown period, staging his first exhibition at Truman Brewery in 2021 before making his auction debut at Sotheby's in the 2022 *Contemporary Curated* sale. His works have since achieved significant auction success, including the sale of *Alara, Ajero and Orangun* for over J31,000. His rapid rise also led to collaborations with

major cultural and fashion figures such as Virgil Abloh, alongside projects with brands including Louis Vuitton, Converse, Burberry, Timberland, and Dr. Martens. In 2023, he became the youngest and first Nigerian-born artist to design the statuette for the Brit Awards, later also redesigning the FA Cup trophy. His major 2024 solo exhibition, *I Present to You, Slawn*, at Saatchi Yates further cemented his position as one of the most dynamic voices in contemporary African art.

## ARTISTIC STYLE

Slawn's artistic practice is rooted in immediacy, spontaneity, and the rebellious visual culture of the street. Emerging initially from Lagos' underground skateboarding and streetwear communities, his earliest works carried the raw energy of graffiti, youth culture, and urban improvisation. Before gaining international recognition, Slawn's creative language was deeply connected to collective spaces such as Wafflesncream and Motherlan, environments where fashion, music, skateboarding, and art intersected as forms of resistance and self-definition. These early experiences shaped his philosophy of art-making as an instinctive and democratic act rather than a rigid academic exercise. Drawing became for him a direct extension of thought and emotion presented as fast, exaggerated, disruptive, and emotionally unfiltered.

His visual language developed around distorted cartoon-like figures, oversized facial features, chaotic line work, and symbolic fragmentation. The clownish and caricatured imagery that frequently appears in his paintings reflects his engagement with satire and absurdity as tools for critiquing contemporary life. Influenced by street art, comic illustration, popular media, Yoruba visual culture, and the improvisational energy of graffiti, Slawn's works often oscillate between humour and discomfort, innocence and menace. Thick black outlines, gestural marks, and layered compositions create an atmosphere of controlled disorder where figures appear suspended between figuration and abstraction.

As his career evolved following his relocation to London in 2017, there was a noticeable shift in both the scale and psychological complexity of his work. While his earlier pieces carried a more playful and overtly rebellious aesthetic tied closely to street culture, his more recent works reveal increasing introspection. Within the *Mono and Me* series especially, Slawn strips away colour almost entirely, relying on monochrome contrasts to heighten emotional intensity and visual immediacy. This transition toward black-and-white compositions marks a conceptual refinement in his practice: colour no longer mediates the

viewer's experience, leaving line, gesture, and form exposed in their rawest state.

Thematically, his practice also evolved from documenting external urban culture toward examining memory, displacement, identity, and the psychological tension of belonging between Lagos and London. Returning conceptually to Nigeria through *Mono and Me*, Slawn reflects on the myths, histories, and emotional residues that continue to shape him despite global success. His paintings increasingly resemble fragmented psychological landscapes where personal memory collides with collective experience. Through distortion, satire, improvisation, and visual chaos, Slawn transforms disorder into a contemporary language of storytelling that speaks simultaneously to local realities and global urban culture.



Olaolu Slawn. During the making of *Police and Thief* (courtesy: Aitalohi & Atalokhai Ohiwerei)

## ANALYSIS OF THE WORK

In *Police and Thief*, Slawn constructs a psychologically charged visual environment where lines derived from spontaneity express visual satire about memory, and urban anxiety. Executed in the monochromatic visual language characteristic of the *Mono and Me* series, the work abandons conventional pictorial stability in favour of immediacy and instinctive expression. The composition is densely populated by overlapping lines, distorted figures, fragmented symbols, and restless gestures that resist singular interpretation. Rather than guiding the viewer through a linear narrative, Slawn creates a fractured visual experience that mirrors the instability, contradiction, and sensory overload of contemporary urban life.

The title *Police and Thief* immediately invokes ideas of pursuit, surveillance, power, criminality, and social tension, themes deeply resonant within both Nigerian and global

urban realities. Yet, rather than illustrating a literal confrontation, Slawn approaches these themes psychologically and symbolically. The compressed figures appear trapped within the shallow pictorial field, their exaggerated limbs, disjointed faces, and distorted bodily forms entangled in a state of perpetual motion and confusion. This deliberate instability reflects Slawn's broader artistic philosophy in which disorder functions not as failure, but as an authentic representation of lived experience. The work embodies the artist's belief that visual expression should remain immediate, emotionally unfiltered, and instinct-driven.

Formally, the painting demonstrates Slawn's continued engagement with the aesthetics of graffiti, caricature, skate culture, and street improvisation developed during his formative years within Lagos' underground youth culture and later sharpened within London's contemporary art scene. Thick black contours slash aggressively across the white background like hurried public inscriptions or subconscious annotations. The line itself becomes performative, nervous, impulsive, rebellious, and emotionally charged. This gestural approach reflects Slawn's rejection of academic rigidity in favour of a democratic visual language rooted in instinct, movement, and cultural immediacy.



Olaolu Slawn. *Police and Thief*, spray paint on canvas

The monochrome palette is particularly significant within the conceptual framework of *Mono and Me*. By stripping away colour, Slawn removes decorative distraction and forces attention onto gesture, psychological tension, and structural fragmentation. Black and white become metaphors for duality and contradiction: order and chaos, innocence and guilt, authority and resistance, sincerity and satire. This binary tension echoes the title itself, where

“police” and “thief” exist not merely as opposing figures but as unstable social identities that can collapse into one another. The work therefore transcends literal interpretation and becomes an exploration of fractured morality, survival, and the ambiguities of power within contemporary society.

Despite the apparent chaos, fragments of recognizable imagery emerge intermittently across the surface such as the eyes, mouths, floral motifs, hands, and cartoon-like facial distortions. These visual interruptions create moments of temporary recognition before dissolving back into abstraction. This oscillation between clarity and obscurity is central to Slawn’s practice. His figures often appear clownish or humorous at first glance, yet beneath their exaggerated forms lies an unsettling psychological intensity. The satirical dimension of his work functions as both critique and coping mechanism, reflecting the absurdities, anxieties, and contradictions embedded within modern existence. Importantly, *Police and Thief* also reflects the conceptual evolution evident throughout Slawn’s career. While his earlier works were closely aligned with the rebellious visual energy of skateboarding, streetwear, and youth subculture, the *Mono and Me* series reveals a more introspective and psychologically layered direction. Returning conceptually to Nigeria through this body of work, Slawn engages memory not through nostalgia, but through fragmentation and emotional residue. The work becomes less about documenting external reality and more about mapping internal psychological landscapes shaped by displacement, identity, migration, and cultural hybridity between Lagos and London.

## CONCLUSION

*Police and Thief* exemplifies Slawn’s ability to transform visual chaos into a sophisticated language of contemporary storytelling. Through distortion, improvisation, satire, and gestural intensity, the artist constructs a work that is simultaneously playful and unsettling, deeply personal yet socially expansive. The painting resists fixed meaning, inviting viewers instead into an unstable space where identity, authority, and urban experience remain fluid, contested, and emotionally charged.

## REFERENCES

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