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Welcome to the Pleasure Zone



Chris Ofili, *The Caged Bird's Song* (2014-17), National Gallery, London © Chris Ofili. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London, The Clothworkers' Company and Dovecot Tapestry Studio, Edinburgh. Photo credit: Gautier Deblonde

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Chris Ofili, *The Caged Bird's Song* (2014-17)

Chris Ofili's painterly skills have been translated into thread in the monumental tapestry *The Caged Bird's Song* (2014-17), now on show in London's National Gallery ("[Chris Ofili: Weaving Magic](#)" until 28 August). Originally a watercolor, this tapestry took almost three years to hand-make on a loom, yet retains the sense of spontaneity of Ofili's initial brushstrokes.

Here, the Arcadian landscapes of classical mythology that are often depicted in Old Master tapestries are given a tropical, contemporary twist, full of erotically charged ambiguity and a taste of Trinidad, Ofili's adopted Caribbean home. His slightly blighted idyll takes its title from the first volume of the late Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and he presents a world in a state of watery flux.



Chris Ofili, *The Caged Bird's Song (Voyeur)* (2014) © Chris Ofili. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London

A pair of lovers sprawl in the central panel, the seated man strumming his guitar and serenading a rather louche female companion, who seems more engrossed in the emerald green cocktail that descends from above in a bubbling torrent, poured by a hovering bow-tied figure. (This trickster butler/magician is modeled on the black Italian footballer Mario Balotelli, whom, according to the exhibition catalogue, Ofili has described as “a troubled figure”).



Chris Ofili, *The Caged Bird's Song (Him)* (2014) © Chris Ofili. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London

The lolling lovers are almost engulfed by a cascading waterfall while storm clouds gather in the distance over a deceptively calm sea. Adding to the ominous sense that something is about to happen, a looming male and female figure on each side panel appear to be drawing back the curtains, allowing us a voyeuristic peep.



Chris Ofili, *The Caged Bird's Song (She) 1* (2014) © Chris Ofili. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London

The astonishing way in which the fluid sumptuousness of Ofili's original watercolor has been captured in this giant expanse of woven fabric is testament to the weavers of [Dovecot Studios](#) in Edinburgh. The artist built a close and trusting relationship with the five Dovecot weavers who have so magically captured the effect of Ofili's rapid brushstrokes, his sweeps of charcoal and delicately overlapping pools of translucent color. The weavers were encouraged to use their intuition and expertise, blending different colored yarns and sometimes even different kinds of fibre—wool, cotton and viscose—to make this work so arresting.

The Caged Bird's Song was commissioned for the dining hall of [The Clothworkers' Company](#), an ancient City of London livery company established in 1528 to promote the craft of cloth finishing. Before it vanishes into its permanent home, it has been granted a four-month stopover at the National Gallery, where Ofili heightens the effect of languorous libidinousness—as well as the impact of its rainbow colors—by showing the work in a room entirely covered with a shadowy grisaille temporary mural of swaying, monumental temple dancers. It could all be a bit too much, but the gamble pays off as Ofili and his weavers conjure up a voluptuous pleasure zone that takes no prisoners.



Chris Ofili, *The Caged Bird's Song* (2014-17), National Gallery, London © Chris Ofili. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London, The Clothworkers' Company and Dovecot Tapestry Studio, Edinburgh. Photo credit: Gautier Deblonde