

Dialogues: The David Zwirner Podcast

Chris Ofili & Emily Wilson

Lucas Zwirner: From David Zwirner, this is *Dialogues*, a podcast about artists and the way they think.

Chris Ofili: And I love the idea, in the first page, where it says, "Tell me about a complicated man." Tell you about the things that he's experienced in life, and how things you have to face, the things that you try to work out. I was drawn to it because I thought maybe I might be able to get to journey into myself.

LZ: I'm Lucas Zwirner, and every episode features a conversation. We're taking artists, writers, philosophers, designers, and musicians and putting them in conversation with each other to explore what it means to make things today.

This episode's pairing: the artist Chris Ofili and the translator and scholar Emily Wilson.

Chris is one of most influential painters working today. He's won a Turner Prize. And some years ago, he moved to Trinidad, and the setting of Trinidad has really informed the way his work has developed and has set the stage for a new body of work based on Homer's *Odyssey*. Chris wanted to show that work uptown, in our gallery on Sixty-Ninth Street in New York, but he also wanted to have a live event in the space.

When I asked him who he wanted to be in conversation with, he immediately said, "Emily Wilson." Emily is a scholar and she is also the first woman to have published an English-language translation of *The Odyssey*. That translation formed the basis for this new body of work of Chris's, so we brought them together at our uptown gallery for a live reading and conversation.

Emily Wilson: So that I figured that I should start by reading the Calypso episode, because it seems that so many of these images seem in some way or other to be engaged with the encounter between the goddess Calypso and Odysseus.

So Zeus says... TK

[Applause]

LZ: I think the first thing I just need to ask, want to ask, Chris, is how you came across this translation?

CO: First page.

LZ: First page?

CO: Yeah. Actually, it's true. I was in London, then I went to Munich to visit Okwui, who is passed now, and we spent the day with him in his apartment, and...

LZ: Okwui is an art curator. He's a good friend of Chris's.

CO: Yeah, art curator who's from Nigeria and worked for many years in New York, very learned, very interesting, very charming kind of guy, and the type of guy that you can spend the day with. But I'd never spent the day with him, because I never felt that I could match his wealth of knowledge. But anyway, he cooked, and we decided to delay the flight till later on in the day. And then he said that he... did I mind if he read? And he took out that book.

And I was quite chilled, because a few weeks earlier I'd been in New York and I'd been at a bookshop near the gallery, 192 Books, which is a nice small bookshop. And the nice thing about buying books in the bookshop is that you can get a recommendation from a person, rather than the computer. And they said... I said, "I'm looking for something to read for the summer." And they said, "What kind of books do you like?" I said, "I quite like books that are written in the first person."

EW: Some of it is.

CO: Right? And they said, "Well you should read this, it's *The Odyssey*." I was like, "I'm not reading *The Odyssey*. I'm not reading *The Odyssey*." That's like very difficult to read and quite a challenge, and I remember trying to read it as a teenager and just thinking this is... the language is so tricky, and it's almost like you have to learn the language in order to truly get into the story and then get into deeper meanings.

And, anyway, I didn't buy the book. And I think I bought some kind of Japanese poetry book or something like that instead. And Okwui opened the first page and started reading, and I just thought this is the most enchanting first page of a book that I ever had read to me. And I was completely hooked and chilled, and at the end of it—he only read the first page. Do you mind reading the first page actually?

EW: Yes. "Tell me about a complicated man. Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy, and where went, and who he met, the pain he suffered on the sea, and how he worked to save his life and bring his men back home. He failed, and for their own mistakes they

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died, they ate the Sun God's cattle, and the god kept them from home. Now goddess, child of Zeus, tell the old story for our modern times. Find the beginning."

CO: I just thought, "Oh, my god. It's like the whole thing is already there."

EW: It's already there, yeah.

CO: In one, and but I loved the idea is that a new translation and it was almost conjuring up for you to tell it to us. And so then I bought a copy...

EW: Thank you.

CO: ...and started reading it, and got hooked. But I'd also bought the audiobook, and I had it read to me at the same time as reading it, and it was read by Claire Danes, right? And I knew you were English, so it was quite strange hearing... it was great hearing a female voice, but it was odd knowing that it wasn't your voice.

EW: Yeah.

CO: And the only other audio book that I read before that was Barack Obama.

EW: Oh, okay.

CO: *Dreams of My Father*, I think. And it's him reading...

EW: He read it, right, yeah.

CO: ...about his life, and so it's like talking to somebody on the phone. And so it was interesting having it read to me at the same time as reading it. And with further reading—I'm not a classics scholar by any stretch of the imagination—but further reading I know that these are meant to be... a poem that's meant to be read out loud to an audience, like somebody's telling you a story.

LZ: Before we maybe get into the work, maybe you'd take us through some of the decisions that guided the translation. I mean, it is very specific. You said earlier that you picked a lot of monosyllabic words. Even that first line—tell us... "Tell me about a complicated man"—is very approachable. It doesn't feel like how you imagine *The Odyssey* will begin when someone tells you about *The Odyssey*. "Tell me about a complicated man" sounds like a conversation at a bar or something like that. But I know that approachability wasn't really your first concern.

EW: Right, I mean, I guess one of my primary concerns was wanting to make a very regular metrical

translation that would both have on some level approachability, if that means simplicity of syntax, because the original has this old storytelling quality, where it's designed to be performed and enjoyed and listened to by audiences of people who aren't literate. And obviously throughout archaic Greece, people weren't reading Homer, they were listening to Homer.

EW: So it has... the syntax is not difficult. It's sort of: and then this happened and this happened and then this happened. I felt that a lot of translations were making it a lot harder than the original is. I also wanted to have the beat of iambic pentameter. I chose iambic pentameter, the original is all in dactylic hexameter, which was the normal meter for the period of archaic Greece, so I wanted...

CO: Emily, can you just break that down?

EW: Okay, yes... So, I know that you've got a fellow exhibit at the same time, right, so iambic pentameter is the meter of Shakespeare. It's the duh, dun, duh, dun, duh, dun, duh, dun, duh, dun, duh, dun, duh, dun.

LZ: So it's the one that we are most used to as English speakers.

EW: The one where we're most used to as English speakers. Whether it's, you know, Shakespeare or Robert Frost, it exists in both the conversational, modern form as well as in a Shakespearean or atonic form. Yeah. So, I wanted to create a language which had a rhythm and also that had something of the clarity of the original. And I guess just looking at your paintings, I love how you're bringing out how there's a sort of clarity and a magicalness and a denseness about it. It's both mysterious and clear at the same time.

I mean, in a way, I think that's part of what I wanted to bring out: how... both this layeredness and a sort of divine quality, which is hard to do without being archaic. It's hard to not say "We used to believe in the gods back in the day," but instead say, "There's something magical right now that could be both from two thousand years ago, and it can also be now."

CO: What I found interesting is that the stories... Odysseus tells these stories quite a few times and not always quite the same. And I like the fact that you... when I was trying to work from it, I didn't really want to illustrate the stories, I wanted to try to be inspired by them to see if something else, another story, could be created from it. And you know the trumpet and the bird and bubbles—birds are mentioned so many times...

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EW: Yes. Right. A lot of birds, yes.

CO: ...in so many different ways.

EW: Very often when Athena appears, she's first a bird, or she goes off like a bird. And the divine manifestation is often through birds, where also Calypso's island is full of birds. So much divine of the sky, it's these birds that come to visit humans.

CO: Yeah, they nest there, but they hunt outside of the islands. I just think so many useful images... that I somehow conjured up a reality for me living on an island in Trinidad, but also trying to create something that wasn't really a place, just a kind of rectangular snippet of a place.

EW: So, it's so fascinating just to sort of think about how does Trinidad relate to Greece? Of course they're both island nations, and these experiences of living so closely to the water. It seems like also these images are so much about beings that are part fish, part human, part land, part water. And I guess *The Odyssey's* also interesting about that, about where is a space, where is a place, or a home, or where do we live? We can live in water as well as on land.

CO: Afterwards, Okwui read... the next piece of writing that he wanted to read was Derek Walcott.

EW: Uh huh.

CO: He didn't tell me it was Derek Walcott. He just started to read this passage, and not complicated but quite mystical, the way he writes, Walcott. And as he was reading, it was mentioning places that I knew in Trinidad. And I stopped him and said, "This is Walcott, and he's talking about Trinidad and some of my places in Trinidad." And somehow then the two texts got fused together for me, Walcott and *The Odyssey*, and, strangely, Walcott has done his own version, *Omeros*.

LZ: Yeah, I mean we talked a little bit about Walcott in advance of this conversation, Chris. But did you... was that someone who was on your mind, as well, considering he did his own version of, like you said, *The Odyssey*?

CO: I've got a copy of *Omeros*, and I haven't read it. I haven't read it, but Derek gave it to me many years ago in London. He did a piece of work with Isaac Julien, called *Paradise Omeros*. They're both from St. Lucia, and I was at maybe an event something like this—but not as good. And he signed this book. I still got this kinda foxed version. Walcott's interesting, for me, just because he pretty much says you can do what

you want. You're not lashed to the text like Odysseus to the mast. You can really move around and take wax out of your ears. You can move around with it.

And I painted as I was reading, and I felt that it released images rather than cast images. I actually wasn't going to tell people that it, the work, was based on *The Odyssey*, because I thought that was going to reduce the reading of it. But then the work's turned out pretty well, so I thought I could.

LZ: How much are you thinking about images when you do the translation? I mean, that's something that obviously weighs heavily on your mind as an artist as you read releasing images, and I know Derek Walcott thinks imagistically as a poet. But were you sort of constructing images, or was language driving it in a different way?

EW: Yeah, I mean, I guess language was primary. And of course, I was lashed to the mast in a certain way, that's what being a translator is. But I definitely wanted to make sure that the material whirling into the visual world just felt as alive and as concrete as possible. I mean, I guess the passages I just read include the very vivid visual description of Calypso's Island—I guess both visual and auditory images. I mean, that's both the sound of the waves, the sound of storms, the sound of people and ships moving through space, and then also what color are things. Homer's colors are notoriously strange.

Where so many things are shining, and I love that. It's another shout out to how wonderful these images are, but just I love how they bring out the shininess and just how magical it can be to be in a world of glitter.

CO: Gold is mentioned so much.

EW: So much gold.

CO: I think I misunderstood, but I thought that Penelope's, the shroud that she's weaving, was of gold or had golden threads in it. And I was running with that. I was running with that in my mind that this, all the way through this, was this woven shroud of gold, and being unpicked, but throughout, throughout there's a lot.

LZ: I mean the gold—it is gold leaf, right? That's in these images, yeah? In some it looks like the gold leaf is applied immediately, or it's thought of as going to have gold leaf. And in some it almost looks like the gold is on top of what was originally a color, or they were colored scales, and then you add. How did the

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gold make its way into the images? I mean, aside from maybe coming in through its presence in *The Odyssey*. I'm curious.

CO: Woven by Xerxes, actually.

LZ: Woven by Xerxes.

CO: All of it.

LZ: As you were reading, I got the feeling it seemed like you might have actually a lower opinion of Odysseus than maybe the rest of us do.

EW: The modern idea of the hero as this superman person who saves the kids from the burning building—that's a very modern idea. That's not the idea of heroes in Greek culture. In Greek culture, being semidivine or somehow more than normal humans doesn't necessarily mean you're morally better than anyone else.

And I didn't see any reason to think the poem thinks Odysseus is a good person, or that he's fun to be married to, or that he's honest, and that he has so much integrity. Obviously he doesn't, right? It may be that we don't mind about integrity and that maybe we care more about survival, and he's very good at telling interesting lies and surviving.

CO: I think it's laid out in that first page. He's a complicated man, isn't he? I think it's funny reading it, and seeing that he's really okay about being a liar. He's okay about being, you know, sacrificing men in order to survive. He's okay about making it seem that he's pissed off at hanging out with Calypso, when he might not be. And that's what I was trying to explore a little bit.

EW: Yes, he's having a good time.

CO: Hang on a minute. Hang on a minute. She's really, really nice. Her island's amazing.

EW: Yes, she's about to make him immortal. And she's incredibly beautiful, and she lives this incredible in place.

CO: Yeah, it's really hard to get there. You know, nobody's going to interrupt them.

EW: No disturbance.

CO: I think when somebody finally arrives, he's on the beach going, "I really don't like being here." My feeling is that he maybe doesn't like being still. I think he's a traveler by nature. And I think he likes adventure

and wants to go on, and I think maybe that's hard for him, really. I think he likes the idea of being a mortal, that there's risk involved.

LZ: One thing we talked about—I'd love to hear more about it—is, of course, being the first woman who has translated *The Odyssey*. People impute to you all sorts of things: intentions, I would imagine, and make assumptions, and assume you're trying to highlight certain things about gender dynamics. Certainly, when I look at some of these works, there's a sort of empowered femininity, and even part of my read, or I was reading that in the works. And of course, I'm suggesting that maybe that was coming from this translation by a woman who's empowering female characters. But of course, that needn't be the case, and I'm just curious how you've navigated some of those conversations around that.

EW: Right, so there have been other women Homerists and have certainly been other women translators of Homer, of *The Odyssey*, as well, into other languages. I am, as far as I know, the first woman to publish a translation in English, and of course that doesn't mean I'm the first woman to have studied the poem or to have translated the poem.

CO: But yours is the best.

EW: Thank you.

CO: So, okay.

EW: Yes, I mean, I'm interested in gender. I'm interested in the representation of social class in general in the poem, which includes gender, but it doesn't just include gender. I definitely was... it's not my default assumption that female characters are less interesting than male characters, and that is a default assumption for some readers, including quite a lot of male readers, not all male readers. I feel like the empowering women is sort of a problematic idea, because of course there were plenty of female characters in this poem who don't have any power, and the same characters, both male and female. It's not like I can suddenly say, let me just go in there and pretend that the slaves had lots of power, when I don't think they actually do.

CO: But the choice of naming them slaves already denotes that they have less power.

EW: It's a way of just making something visible, rather than making it less visible. I mean, I think there's always choices about where do you shine light, and where... what do you make clear, what do you make less clear? What kinds of obscurity do you not want?

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I mean, I don't feel that I had to work very hard to see that there were a lot of very powerful female characters. I mean we've been talking about the power of Calypso. The whole poem, the whole plot, is engineered by Athena.

CO: By Athena, yeah.

EW: Athena is the one who really engineers everything that happens in *The Odyssey*. I mean, I guess we could argue about to what extent is she fully identified as female. I mean, she's on some level nonbinary. When she manifests as human, she usually manifests as a man, though occasionally as a woman.

The poem itself seems really interested, I think, in the range of different ways you can be either male or female. It's just one thing that femininity would mean. I think that's part of why it's so fascinating that it's not saying there's one little box that we can put female into. And then everything else is this whole range of other human experience, which doesn't include female. It's not like that. There's a whole range of experience that covers full the way from divine to enslaved, which is female.

LZ: I think this is amazing about this transformation in the works, that the characters begin to resemble one another...

CO: That's what, yeah.

LZ: That there's this... You don't know who's male or female. There's this ambiguity.

CO: I was honestly trying to represent Athena in the golden in the figure—the fact that she can transform into different forms. But I did wonder how many different forms. I started trying to count at one point but stopped, how many different forms she assumes through the poem.

EW: There were many, many forms. I mean, I guess in Book Thirteen when Odysseus and Athena have a conversation, and she's explaining that she's so much better at tricks and lies and disguises than he is. And he's boasting about how great he is at lying, and she's even better.

CO: Yeah, he's funny because he likes to say that he's clever, because he's become something else and he's tricked. She just does it, right?

There's musical art form in Trinidad—well, type of music, genre—called Calypso music. And I... that was the other reason why. And it's not... I don't think it derives from this, but I think it could.

EW: Yes.

CO: When you look it up...

EW: It would be great if it did.

CO: ...it makes no mention of Homer, and you're like, "No." I was fishing for a subject, and I thought maybe it was being handed to me on a plate, this connection between Trinidad and this incredible poem. And it turns out that it wasn't really, but I had to stitch it in myself. And I'm fifty-one in October, right? And I see life a little different to how I did when I was twenty-one. And I love the idea, in the first page, where it says, "Tell me about a complicated man." Tell you about the things that he's experienced in life, and how the things you have to face, the things that you try to work out. And I was drawn to it because I thought maybe I might be able to get to journey into myself through the process of reading about a man and his experiences. And I think the book is, or the poem, is wonderful because it's just somebody journeying really and going round and round. And sometimes you feel as though you're going round in circles, when actually you're spiraling. You might actually be climbing and gaining a bit more altitude, rather than staying in the same place.

So Book Five, I think, allowed me to apparently stay in one place, but I think spiral around the idea of being entrapped and being liberated simultaneously, and truth and lies.

LZ: Thank you. Thank you so much.

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