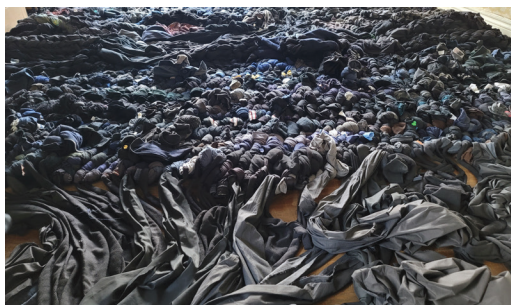


## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Victoria-Idongesit Udondian, *How Can I Be Nobody*

March 5 - April 10, 2022

Opening Reception: Sat. March 5, 5-7PM



*How Can I Be Nobody* is a site-specific solo exhibition combining elements from Udondian's recent collaborative projects that include woven textiles, sculptures, and sound, the artist's first major solo exhibition in New York City. Continuing her recent exploration into the links between bodies and transit within global labor economies, the installation connects Smack Mellon's Dumbo gallery, a former industrial site, to the foundational role of immigrant labor in capitalist production.

Udondian conceived of this project as an opportunity for individuals from marginalized subcultural groups to construct a shared understanding of their historical past to resist systems of domination. Starting with an initial call for collaborators in 2019, Udondian has developed relationships with various local immigrant communities, including a partnership with Stitch Buffalo, a textile center near the artist's studio that facilitates refugee and immigrant women in creating handcrafted goods to find economic empowerment. She has collaborated with and compensated community members, weaving with them and creating sculptural casts of their hands while collecting their stories.

At Smack Mellon, the cast hands reside in and around a suspended ship rib, constructed to reference the eighteenth-century diagram of the Brookes slave ship as well as countless boats carrying migrants who have crossed the Mediterranean Sea. The large-scale collaborative weavings are primarily composed of repurposed black fabric in acknowledgement of the black and brown lives lost in search of better conditions. The exhibition also includes performance footage from Udondian's ongoing project *The Republic of Unknown Territory*, begun in 2017 during her own naturalization process, in which she required gallery visitors to undergo rigorous immigration processes in order to gain access to the space.

The exhibition's title is a quote from one of Udondian's collaborators who, while struggling to divulge her personal history fearing that it would put the community in her home country in danger, asked, "How can I be nobody and tell you my story?" Her sentiment elucidates anxieties of persecution that many immigrants and refugees carry with them into unfamiliar places due to the lack of protection available to them. As a project, *How Can I Be Nobody* asks viewers to consider the myriad societal contributions of immigrant populations in the face of growing intolerance and nationalism across America and Europe. By bridging direct engagement with these communities and contemporary art audiences, Udondian facilitates individuals from marginalized subcultural groups in constructing a shared understanding of their historical past to promote re-empowerment.

# Smack Mellon

---

## BIO

Udondian's work is driven by her interest in textiles and the potential for clothing to shape identity, informed by the histories and tacit meanings embedded in everyday materials. She creates interdisciplinary projects that question notions of cultural identity and post-colonial positions in relation to her experiences growing up in Nigeria. In 2020, Udondian was named a Guggenheim Fellow. Her works have been exhibited internationally, including The Inaugural Nigerian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennial-An Excerpt; Fisher Landau Center for the Arts, New York; The Bronx Museum, New York; The Children Museum of Manhattan, New York; The National Museum, Lagos and Lokoja, Nigeria; Whitworth Gallery in Manchester, Centre for Contemporary Arts, Lagos, Nigeria etc. Some of her Artist Residencies include Instituto Sacatar, Bahia, Brazil; Mass Moca, Massachusetts, USA; Fine Arts Work Center (FAWC), Provincetown; USA; Villa Strulli, Winthethur, Switzerland; Fondazione di Venezia, Venice, Italy; and Bag Factory Studios, Johannesburg, South Africa. Udondian received an MFA in Sculpture and New Genres from Columbia University, New York, attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and earned a BA in painting from the University of Uyo, Nigeria.

Image courtesy of the Artist.

---

*This exhibition is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, New York City Council Member Stephen Levin, and the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature, and with generous support from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Lily Auchincloss Foundation, Robert Lehman Foundation, Select Equity Group Foundation, many individuals and Smack Mellon's Members.*

*Smack Mellon's programs are also made possible with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and with generous support from The Edward and Sally Van Lier Fund of The New York Community Trust, Jerome Foundation, The Roy and Niuta Titus Foundation, Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation Inc., and Exploring The Arts. In-kind donations are provided by Materials for the Arts, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs/NYC Department of Sanitation/NYC Department of Education.*

*Space for Smack Mellon's programs is generously provided by the Walentas family and Two Trees Management. Smack Mellon would like to extend a special thanks to all of the individuals, foundations, and businesses who have contributed to the NYC COVID-19 Response & Impact Fund.*

*How Can I Be Nobody is supported by the Guggenheim Fellowship. It is sponsored, in part, by the Greater New York Arts Development Fund of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, administered by Brooklyn Arts Council. This project was supported, in part, by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant. The artist would like to acknowledge past support from Project for Empty Space (Newark, NJ), South London Gallery (London, UK), Stitch Buffalo, (Buffalo, NY). She would like to thank her amazing collaborators: Mu Mu, Ta Phay, Hnin Si, Muna, Da John who all made this work possible.*