



## 26 Chris Ofili

1968 – British

### Saint Lucian Blue

oil, acrylic and charcoal on canvas,  
on verso signed, titled and dated 2006  
109 ½ x 78 ¾ in, 278.1 x 200 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin  
Acquired from the above by George Hartman and  
Arlene Goldman, 2006

#### LITERATURE

*Chris Ofili: The Blue Rider, Extended Remix*, Kestnengesellschaft,  
2006, reproduced page 149 and listed page 178

#### EXHIBITED

Kestnengesellschaft, Hanover, *Chris Ofili: The Blue Rider,  
Extended Remix*, June – August 2006

*SAINT LUCIAN BLUE* from 2006 forms part of a body of work that was presented by Chris Ofili in two major solo exhibitions, *The Blue Rider* (Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, 2005) and *The Blue Rider, Extended Remix* (Kestnengesellschaft, Hanover, 2006). In this important group of paintings, drawings and sculptures, created around the time that Ofili relocated from London to Trinidad in 2005, the artist set out to explore the technical and expressive potential of painting; the cycle represents a radical shift in Ofili's practice and a new kind of figuration that secures the artist's reputation as one of the most dynamic artists working today.

As the influential curator Okwui Enwezor observed, the works shown in the Blue Rider exhibitions conclude the decade of highly decorative paintings derived from hip-hop culture for which Ofili became well known in Britain during the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to these opulent, Afrocentric paintings comprised of glitter, resin, map pins and collaged images from magazines, propped up from the floor by clumps of elephant dung, *Saint Lucian Blue's* debut in the exhibition in the exhibition *Chris Ofili: The Blue Rider, Extended Remix* (Kestnengesellschaft, Hanover, 2006) revealed a new, clarified language of natural and human forms cast within more spacious, monochromatic fields of colour. Ofili described his move to Trinidad as a "rebirth" that



Chris Ofili, winner of The Turner Prize in 1998, circa 2000  
Courtesy of Getty Images  
Photo: Eamonn McCabe/Popperfoto

brought about a fresh and heightened visual awareness; this work announced Ofili's new, highly symbolic and allegorical form of painterly expression fusing Western art history, mythology and Christian iconography, in which issues of history, race and identity take on more complex and coded forms.

Ofili's use of close-keyed blues and silvers can be traced back to his earliest works and demonstrates the artist's feeling for colour on an emotional and physical level as well as a political and ideological one. He employed the restricted colour palette of the red, black and green of Marcus Garvey's Pan-African flag in



*Black Paranoia*, 1997 (private collection) to explore the subject of Black identity, modernism and modernity. Subjecting himself to this same strict palette for his exhibition *Within Reach* at the 2003 *Venice Biennale*, Ofili went on to complete his landmark installation *The Upper Room*, 1999 – 2002 (collection of the Tate, UK), comprised of 13 monochromatic paintings of rhesus monkeys presented in a church-like room akin to the *Last Supper*. *Saint Lucian Blue* continues Ofili's interest in developing his paintings monochromatically to extraordinary sensory effect. As the artist describes: "To work exclusively with blue was the biggest challenge... I was trying to find new ways to use a colour to the point of saturation, to the point where you don't see it."<sup>2</sup>

Presenting blue in many hues, textures and forms, and suggestive of various ambiances from the velvety warmth of the

midnight sky to soulful indigo blues, Ofili found in the works of his Blue Rider shows a way of working more quickly and on multiple images, using blue "to the point of saturation" when it becomes difficult to "see." Playing with different states of visibility and pushing his work beyond the binary of black and white, these works unfold as a riff on the colour's many spiritual and cultural associations. Truth and eternity, the mysterious and the divine, conjure a transcendent melancholy, projecting various states of blackness. Behind these seductive surfaces lurk darker themes and tales of betrayal, murder, love, loneliness, repression and sexism that are played out by Ofili's cast of phantasmagorical characters under the silvery moonlight.<sup>3</sup>

As evidenced in Ofili's dreamily painted representations of vegetation suggesting an exotic, nocturnal Garden of Eden, the

colour blue also expresses something specific about Trinidad that the artist described as the unique feeling and atmosphere of the place and the mystery of the island's forests, particularly at night:

I've found that the night and twilight here enhances the imagination. In the city, our relationship to the night is very particular because it's always illuminated, but here it's unlit, so you're relying on the light of the moon and sensitivity of the eyes. It's a different level of consciousness that is less familiar to me, and stimulating through a degree of fear and mystery.<sup>4</sup>

*Saint Lucian Blue* is also significant in the way it reflects the artist's long-standing interest in religious painting and in revisiting and reimagining the biblical stories that as a young altar boy in Manchester, he heard being read repeatedly. "The stories have stayed with me," Ofili once said, "although they are completely remixed in my head. And often when I do further reading, I'm quite surprised by the difference between the real story and my memory of the story."<sup>5</sup> Interested in the continued relevance of such stories and their potential to make powerful images, the artist relocates the early Saint Lucian of Antioch—the Syrian martyr who was instrumental in the translation of the early Gospels—to the Caribbean, rendering him in *Saint Lucian Blue* by way of a portrait of fellow artist Isaac Julien. Born in London to parents who had migrated from Saint Lucia, Julien visited Ofili's studio to sit for this work in which his besuited figure is visited by an erotically charged female muse, her serpentine limbs expressive of the temptation which by tradition the saint wrestled with in his early life. That Lucian's name is derived from the Greek word *lux*, meaning "light" or "to shine," as well as being suggestive of the fallen angel Lucifer, is likely not lost on Ofili, who, captivated by the tradition of the Blue Devils, who descend each year from the hills in blue costumes to torment revellers during Trinidad's carnival, harnesses the power of this transcendental colour to explore menacing forces beyond its formal qualities.

As a quintessential Ofili image, sampling a range of cultural, historical and visual sources that flow together, *Saint Lucian Blue* offers a nuanced social critique that speaks to humankind's capacity for resistance, and refusal to accept defeat. Assimilating and uprooting this age-old subject to a contemporary audience, it alludes to themes of displacement, mobility and multiplicity evident throughout Ofili's life and work. On that basis, it is perhaps unsurprising that Ofili intended his title *The Blue Rider* to pay homage to *Der Blaue Reiter*, a group of German avant-garde painters of the early twentieth century who admired the mystical powers of the colour blue and whose expressionist images explored the relationships between art, music, colour and spiritualism to counter the urban materialism of their age. Revealing how the artist's formal inventiveness and experimentation have developed into a distinctive iconography fusing spirituality, folklore and the natural world, *Saint Lucian Blue* is a masterfully painted rendering of the artist's observations, his knowledge of art, and his insatiable curiosity about the world.



*Der Blaue Reiter* almanac, edited by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, 1912. Front cover with Saint George

We thank Helen Little, independent curator and organizer of Ofili's survey exhibition (Tate Britain, London, 2010) for contributing the above essay.

1. See Okwui Enwezor, "The Vexations and Pleasures of Colour: Chris Ofili's 'Afromuses' and the Dialectic of Painting," in *Chris Ofili*, ed. Judith Nesbitt (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), exhibition catalogue, 73.
2. Chris Ofili in conversation with Thelma Golden in Carol Becker, *Chris Ofili* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), 243–44.
3. See Hilke Wagner, "The Blue Rider: Extended Remix," in *Chris Ofili: The Blue Rider, Extended Remix* (Hanover: Kestnergesellschaft, 2006), exhibition catalogue, 110.
4. "Ekow Eshun Interviews Chris Ofili," in Nesbitt, *Chris Ofili*, 103.
5. *Ibid.*, 99.

**ESTIMATE: \$350,000 – 450,000**