

# CORNER

NOTTING HILL DISTILLED  
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ISSUE



**RIDING OUT**  
WITH HYDE  
PARK STABLES

**MASTER OF  
THE ARTS**  
DAMILOLA  
ODUSOTE

**A RUM TALE**  
THE STORY OF  
LA HECHICERA



**RISING STARS**  
THE RCA'S FACES  
OF THE FUTURE



CULTURE

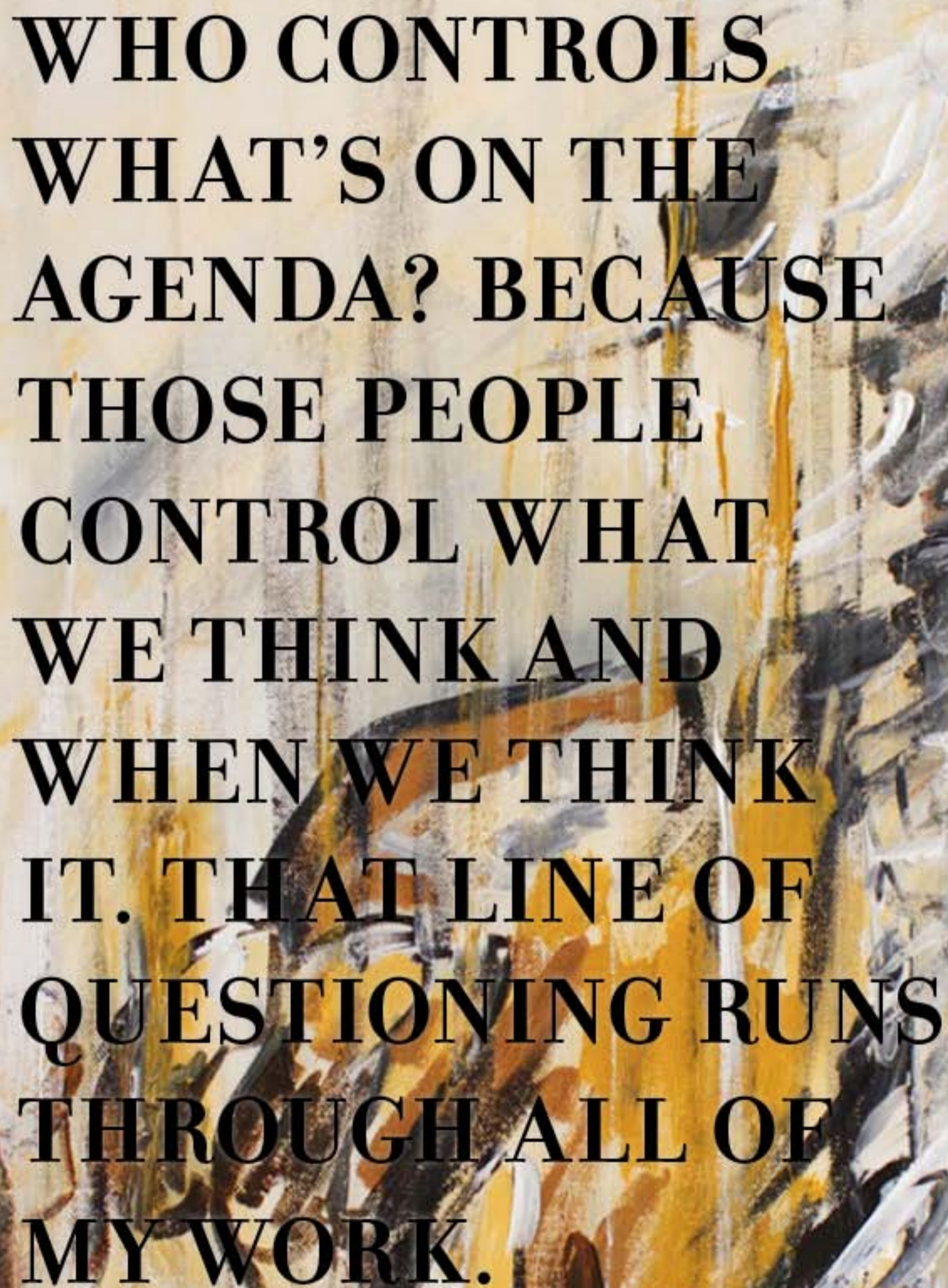
**I**t's hard to believe that Damilola Odusote is just 29. This mounting sense of disbelief owes nothing, it should be noted, to his appearance. Rather, such incredulity stems from the fact that he has crammed quite so much into his not-so-many years. For most people, the dawning shock that a decade has past since a life event usually marks the elapse of time since those more prosaic landmarks of leaving school or university; for Odusote, however, the realisation comes courtesy of the fact that 10 years have now intervened since his first dance job – in an Usher music video, no less. Since then, he has graduated from Camberwell College of Art, exhibited at a surfeit of prestigious exhibitions; rubbed shoulders with A-listers; performed at the BRITS and the Royal Variety; and taught at Pineapple dance studio – all amongst a myriad of other work.

As Odusote nonchalantly rattles off yet more accolades to have peppered his already prolific career, a picture begins to form of a man whose gifts have dictated success from the off. Represented by Debut Contemporary, the gallery's profile of the artist hails his trajectory as 'mythological'; ordinarily, such lavish praise can be dismissed as hyperbole; in that of Odusote, it's nothing of the sort. Born to Nigerian parents, he was fostered by a Romanian family in Tilbury, Essex, where the clan rose above the crime and systemic racism to achieve great things (one brother, Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje, is a Hollywood actor). 'It was hard to think creatively,' he says. 'There was no outlet. It was a nine-to-five sort of place, with everyone getting drunk on a Friday night. I didn't know where I wanted to go, but I knew that wasn't it.'

As far back as he can remember, Odusote was rarely parted from his sketchbook ('at school, the bell would go and I'd still be sitting there, sketching characters from Super Mario') and, aged 18, he left Tilbury for Camberwell to enrol on an illustration degree course. These days, his work takes in the gamut from sculpture to expansive, expressive portraiture to intricate illustration, which typically references the city. 'When I came to London, I started to incorporate my surroundings into the work. At Camberwell I had that mix of being a black guy who'd been brought up as a white person in Essex – so I was this white person within a black person in a predominantly white university in a predominantly black area in a predominantly white country. So that, as well as being mixed with artists from different backgrounds, was all ammunition.'

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All the while, he kept up his already burgeoning career as a dancer, which had taken off after he approached a Hip Hop collective in his local shopping mall as a teenager. The group in question? The boys who would go on to become Diversity and triumph at the 2009 *Britain's Got Talent*.

His dizzying schedule is something that Odusote takes in his stride. 'I've always been juggling. When I was working at Selfridges, I screen-printed a design on a shirt. I would wear it to work with a killer suit, because, well, you never know. I served one person who said: 'I like your look – are you a designer?' I said: 'No, I'm an illustrator, have a look at my sketchbook.' She said, 'I like your work, give this number a call.' That number just so happened to hook him up with high street store, Next, who commissioned five T-shirts. And Odusote being Odusote, has not rested on his laurels; he's also directed and produced a film for Ethan K (handbag designer favoured by Beyoncé), created artwork for Rita Ora's turn on the *The Jonathan Ross Show*, and is currently busy working on a limited-edition series for Made.com, out now.

It's clear that Odusote's agile brain never stops whirring – so it's fortunate then that working in so many media allows him to express his fast-flowing ideas. 'Every art form is available for different voices,' he says. 'I wouldn't do a political piece as a portrait because I feel it would be too powerful and too preachy, so I'd rather take a more subtle approach with illustration because there's more going on around it to mask the underlying themes.' There was one exception though: 'The Olympics portraits I did were more analytical. There was this whole media frenzy to force you to be happy about the Olympics. You don't need to tell me to be that happy! I wanted to address those issues they didn't highlight, like the G4S scandal, the changing of the marathon from Tower Hamlets to Pall Mall, and the social and political ramifications of that.'

The media comes in for some close scrutiny through his work. 'My whole thing is to question everything. When I'm working through the night I often have the BBC News on in the background, and it's so generic and repetitive. If you hear a speech in the daytime, and then later hear it paraphrased, you think, 'that isn't actually how it sounded.' They remove the context and that is immoral. I try to highlight that in my work.' He warms to his theme: 'What is actually being shown in the media? Who says that that is the story to run with? We're being asked to look at the conflicts in one spot when, in fact, there are conflicts around the world. Who controls what's on the agenda? Because those people control what we think and when we think it. That line of questioning runs through my work.'

And there you have him. Damilola Odusote: analytic super-talent to watch. **C**



Vanessa  
5/2/13