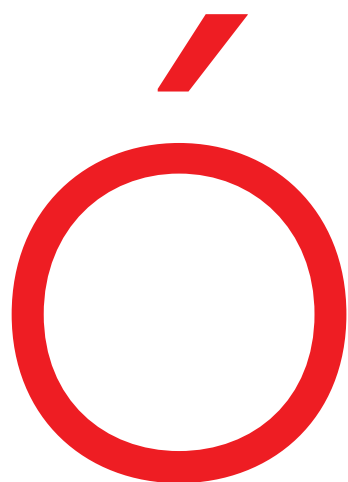


# Agbowó

ISSUE 1

JULY 2018







Agbowó is an afrocentric literary and arts community. At Agbowó, we collect great literary and visual African art, listen to new voices and embrace innovative artistic expression. We are creating a platform where the works of African writers and artists come alive and readers find the most intriguing work.

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# PREFACE

X is for indeterminacy. The works of literature in this issue were not selected based on any unifying theme. There are essays about food, language and the spate of the current crop of the literary elite. There are poems about love, for sure, about the religious and about addiction. The stories are just as divergent. What, however, makes this issue into an organic unit is the sprinkling of visual art which perform an adhesive function at several parts of this work. The cubist painter, Olalekan Odunbori's *Ìgbàsíle èdè Yorùbá* comes immediately after the transcript of a Kola Tubosun speech in one of the many cases of the visual, in this issue, speaking to or clarifying or mystifying the literary.

X also contains interviews with the seven contributing visual artists. In these interviews, with Sheyi Owolabi, Agbowó's photography editor, the artists hold nothing back. They respond as though they've waited for an indeterminate amount of time to be asked those questions. These along with the art represent the new content that this Issue brings to avid Agbowó readers as the literary work herein have already been featured, over the first one year of our existence, on the website- [agbowo.org](http://agbowo.org).

In this Issue, Abisola Gbadamosi shares with us her enchanting art which she claims are always a lunge at catharsis. We get new products of Niyi Okeowo's minimalism, Segun Okewumi's brilliant sculptural work with recycled materials, and a beautiful story of Opeyemi Matthew's switch from Pure and Applied Chemistry to Fine and Applied Arts. Jekein Lato-Unah, known to many as the only woman working through Mufu Onifade's Araism, gives us work that seeks novel portrayals of the feminine that ignite conversation about gender-based ills of society. Ubiomo Ogheneroh, whose *Spacewoman* is the cover for this Issue, has created a new art style, *Kpuri*.

This issue would not have been possible but for the terrific work the team members of Agbowó; Habeeb Kolade, Dolapo Amusat, Olu Afolabi, Winifred Binogun, Darafunmi Olanrewaju, Adekunle Adebajo, Sheyi Owolabi and Debola Abimbola, have put in over the last one year. We also acknowledge Augustine Togonu-Bickersteth, an ardent supporter, and believer in the Agbowó dream. Our deepest appreciation goes to you, the consumers of new African art, the audience without whom we wouldn't have performed.

Enjoy X.

Moyosore Orimoloye  
Ilé Ifè  
July 2018



Cover Art by Ubiomo C.O.  
Book and Cover Design by Agbowó

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# Starlight

Gbenga Adeoba

I am furling like arcs of tendrils unknown.  
Perhaps it is the rhythm wafting from your country;  
or the way of waters, how they hold flotsams  
in their wake, in grips weighed in ripples.  
Only that there is no water here anymore  
and day too has strayed into a dark room.  
I think now of the incandescence  
of your eyes, their fidelity, the tender pull  
of this sheen offering a look into the years  
beyond and their promise of rain.  
Tonight, Lagos is shrouded in a shawl  
of half-light; time and the dark limiting  
the variance of a promenade or the cavorting  
of lovers. Yet we will dance to the skies,  
Itunu, knowing the stars would witness, yet again,  
to our oneness with their continent of songs.



Abisola Gbadamosi, *Tagba*, 2018

# INTERVIEW

## Ubiomo Chinedu O.

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*This is one in a seven-part interview series featuring selected artists using various media. We try to go under the hood of the artist's craft.*

**To open the seal, we will like to know some things about you; your background, growing up, why and how you became an artist.**

My name is Ubiomo Chinedu Ogheneroh, creator of the Kpuri art style. I was born on the 19th of May, 1993, am a native of Otor-Iyede in Isoko North - Delta State, Nigeria. I'm a graduate of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where I studied Fine and Applied Arts and specialized in Graphics. I'm a professional abstract digital painter, 2D illustrator, graphic designer, and a writer.

My story as an artist all started in my secondary school days, Class One, when I scribbled a lot, my notebooks were always filled with comical drawings, I always ran out of paper because I always tore the middle for drawings... well, truth be told, sometimes for building kites and canoes. I remember one time, an assignment was given for the class to make drawings on different body posture, I took the homework like a commission, I took my small table out and gave my best on a

cardboard paper, my work turned out to be the best and was used as an educational material for other classes. When the teacher was explaining she jokingly said I should join the Art class. I did join the Art class and here I am today as a professional certified artist.

**How would you describe your art form?**

My art style is called Kpuri. It's an art style that has to do with abstracts, use of warm colors and African themes. My characters are mostly depicted in stylized forms and are rendered digitally.

**How do you work and what inspires your work?**

I mostly work in series, it gives me the opportunity to explore more on a given theme. My works always capture an African woman, her beauty, style, and elegance. I am deeply inspired by her delicate form. I also get inspirations from my surroundings, people and things in general. I have a huge passion for stylized objects and African patterns.

**Someone once said, "Good art should disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed". What message/messages do you try to convey to the audience via your art?**

Well, most of my themes border on the African woman and the influence of modernity on her, positively or negatively the way she sees herself, how she presents herself and mostly how she adapts to the trends in the society. My recent series on "WOMEN OF COLOUR" was inspired by the beauty of an African woman which aims to celebrate their skin color, giving them comfort if I must borrow that word.

**We are sure you are familiar with a couple of African artist dead or alive. Which of them has been your biggest influence?**

I admire numerous African artists, painters, sculptors and digital artists. Well, I won't say I have any mentor or role model.

**What will you say is your favourite thing about being an artist?**

I find art more as a healing activity, it fuels the mind greatly for innovations and originality. My favorite thing about being an artist is that I can express myself freely (art, literature or even dance), I think one of the difficult and helpless things is not being able to express yourself, art is a gateway to my expression.

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**I believe it's for the artist to give the final say if a piece is done or not.**

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**My works always capture an African woman, her beauty, style and elegance. I am deeply inspired by her delicate form. I also get inspirations from my surroundings, people and things in general. I have a huge passion for stylized objects and African patterns.**

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**Like any other discipline making art definitely has its downsides. What have you observed to be the downsides of being an artist?**

The art world can be a messy place at times, you have to deal with people that have no idea about the origins of art, no knowledge of any past artists, no clue about art movements, or style or techniques posing as critics. Then you come to the pricing part of an artist's work, you have the ones saying "I won't pay such amount just for that", or "just do this work for me in return I will give you exposure", it is crazy out here sometimes! An artist's life is a very tough one, you can really go broke supporting yourself. Well, that's part of the "agreement" we signed and quite a few really back down when such challenges show up, you see them throwing in the towel in surrender. One thing I have learned so far is that when the journey becomes tough-tougher, that is when a breakthrough is around the corner. You have to win, you have to keep pushing yourself every now and then because no one will do that for you.

---

The art world can be a messy place at times, you have to deal with people that have no idea about the origins of art, no knowledge of any past artists, no clue about art movements, or style or techniques posing as critics.

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**When/how do you know a piece of art is finished?**

I believe it's for the artist to give the final say if a piece is done or not.

**In recent times, the spotlight has been on African art especially from the West. What is your opinion on the art scene in your country and Africa art large?**

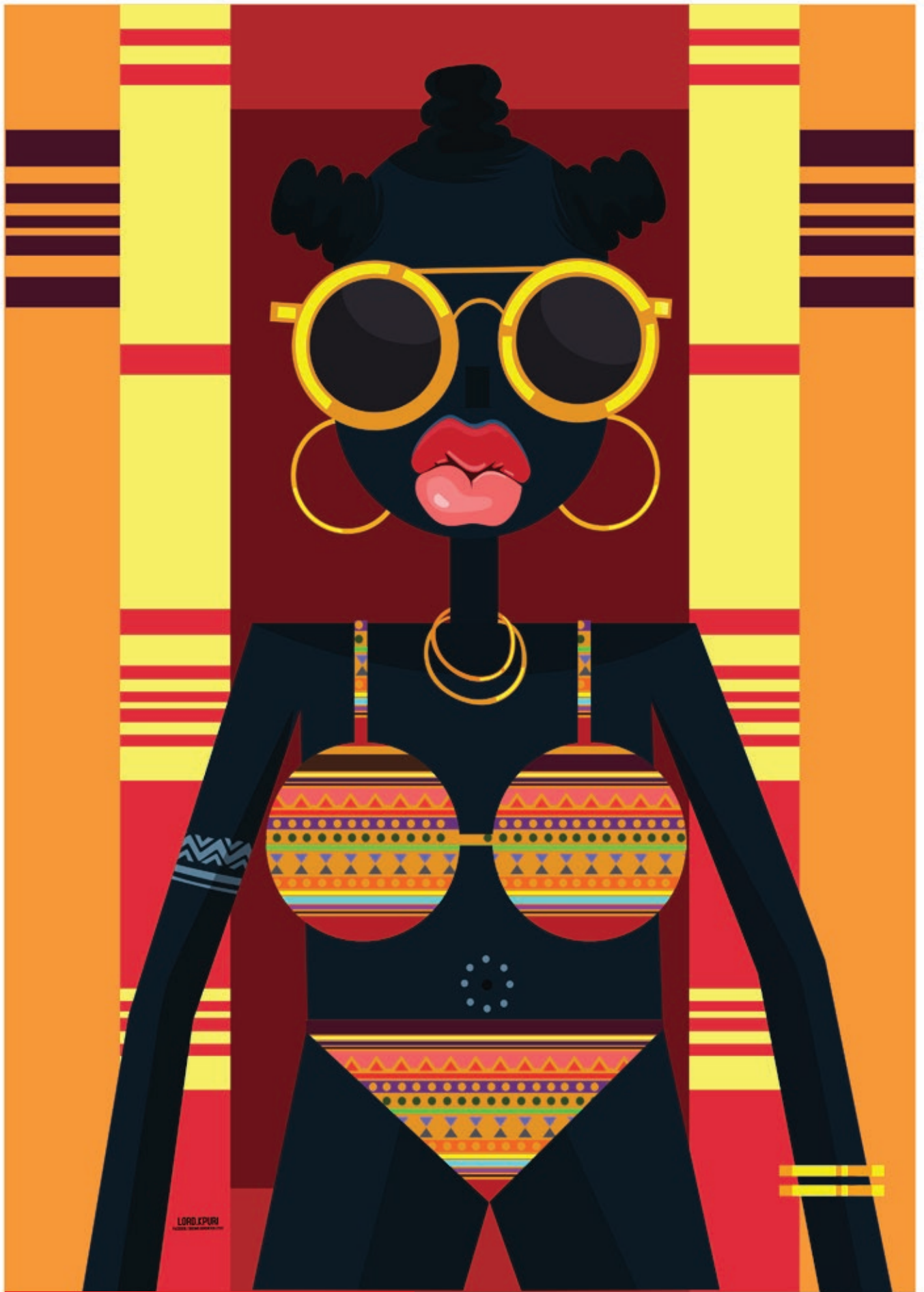
Firstly, Africa is a continent rich with cultural histories; art, aesthetics, masquerading, traditional religion, ancient lifestyle, war periods and so on. Secondly, art practices have always been part of our lifestyle, passed down from generation to generation and carried out with passion and a message/documentation (art is a major topic in African history), and I believe its priceless and the West are trying to lay their hands on any they can lay hands on.

**We like to see Art as a life form chiefly because it evolves and new trends can spring up from anywhere. What art trends are you following at the moment?**

I am a digital artist. I think the world is opening up more to digital art, and the appreciation is greatly encouraging, I will say I'm following the digital trend.

Follow [@lord\\_kpuri](#) on Instagram to experience more from Ubiomo C.O.

Follow [@agbowoart](#) on Instagram to discover more exciting art from various artists.



Ubiomo C.O. *Women of Colour*, 2018.

# On African Languages and Literature: Lessons from Korea

## Kolá Túbosún

*Being the transcript of a talk delivered at Kyung Hee University, Korea, on January 25, 2018, to a group of literature students and professors.*

Thank you so much for having me. *Annyeoung haseyo!* I'm always very happy when I get a response when I say *annyeong haseyo* other than good morning and that fits into my work because in Nigeria where I am from, most people prefer to just say 'good morning', 'good morning'. You know, most young people of nowadays want to feel like they are English or that English language is more important than their own mother tongue. So I am very happy when I'm here and the response I get when I speak Korean or try to speak Korean is much better and much warmer than when I try to speak English. It tells me that there are people in the world, young and old, who care a lot about their language and respond positively to it than just English. So, *kamsa hamnida*.

My name is Kolá Túbosún. I am from a place called Ìbàdàn, that is where I was born, but I live in Lagos, Nigeria, today. It is my first time in Korea. I have been told that I speak fast so I am going to try to slow down so that everybody can understand what I am saying. It is my first time in Korea; it is my first time in Asia. It is my first time in pretty much everywhere else I have been since I have been here. First time we landed at Incheong, we've visited and came to Seoul, we went to Pyeonchang and I came back in Seoul and then we went to Busan and I'm back in Seoul again. Tomorrow I go to Incheong, then I'll be out. I've had so much fun. I have enjoyed the country, the hospitality of the people. Thank you.

My work is in linguistics, language and also in literature. I will try to explain how all of them tie together and if you read the paper, you'll probably have an idea of my work and the kind of thing I have done in the last couple of years even though I am a very young man, as you will find.

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If Chinua Achebe's book, *Things Fall Apart*, exists in other languages and not in Igbo, then there is something fundamentally wrong, I believe, about that.

---

Nigeria is a place in West Africa. It has over 250 different ethnic groups and well over 500 languages. That always throws people off because that's a huge number. What you need to know however that not all of these languages, are used and not all of them are in good health or good condition. Some of them are endangered. Some have died; some are alive but are not used as much and will eventually be extinct over time. This is due to a number of reasons. One of them is government policy, one of them is colonial policy which I discussed in the paper, and one of them is the current attitude by Nigerians and Africans generally to the idea of local language use in pretty much everywhere. So, this has affected education, politics, technology and pretty much everywhere else language is used. I was very happy, for instance, when I realized that Korean is a language that is supported by every part of the society and is used everywhere you go. Even though people try to learn English, it is to communicate in it. Korean is a language that actually matters. English is just so that you can communicate with other people when you meet them from different parts of the world.

In Nigeria, the opposite is the case. Over time people have adopted the perception that English is the only language that matters and that the local language is just a minor inconvenience. Of course there are few people in these languages who care enough about these languages to want to communicate in them, talk to their children in them and perform activities in them, but generally the attitude in Nigeria has been that because we have English, we try not to worry much about other languages.

Now I should explain why English came to play that kind of role in the country. Before the British came, we were just a bunch of small and big — sometimes big, sometimes small — different groups living together, around each other. Then the British colonial experience came and brought everybody together under one country — Nigeria. And because of that, because they wanted to be able to communicate with the whole country and be able to rule, they needed to enforce a uniform language policy. English came to represent this. I am sure you had the same experience with Japanese and other invaders that have ruled over you over time. The result of that is that we all had to learn English while going to school.

The British did something that was interesting since they were ruling through indirect rule. They still pretended to care about local languages because sometimes, in some communities, that was the only way they could reach the members of the community. They had translators that went to kings and made sure there was someone who could transmit important information to the people. Because of that they supported some kind of publishing industry that published in local languages. The bible was translated to Yorùbá and Igbo and other places for instance by the missionaries. There were also a number of smaller activities like that which at least gave some benefit to the local language. So the languages survived and thrived for over a couple of decades. However, since the British left, that part of the policy of colonialism, the part where the British supported a little bit of local language development even though they were doing it for their own good, was removed.

In the 40s and 50s, there were authors who published in Yorùbá, many who published in Igbo and Hausa and some other languages. My grandfather, who is 90 now, read a number

of Yorùbá literature when he was young and there are a number of people who remember those novels. A famous writer is D.O Fágúnwà. He published in the 40s. Those kinds of books existed but over time, due to economic reasons and attitudes like I said, the publishing industry stopped publishing local language literature. They focused only on English. So we have the Sóyínkás, the Achebes, Amos Tutùṣá, Buchi Emecheta, Elechi Amadi and a number of other writers in English. Literature for Nigeria became defined by those who were published only by Nigerian writers of English.

Chinua Achebe said that his writing of English is indigenous. He tried to make the argument that he had been able to use English to transmit knowledge of his Igbo customs. There is a huge debate about whether that is efficient or successful, or whether that is a true manifestation of what is happening or a colonial brainwashing taking over because, at the end of the day, the language in which you are writing still somehow determines what you can put in the work you are putting out. The irony of that is evident especially in Chinua Achebe's case: his book, his most famous work *Things Fall Apart*, has not been translated into his own local language: Igbo. It has been translated into over 50 languages but not Igbo. If you claim English is a Nigerian language like you did, are you saying English is the only Nigerian language which is a question I have been trying to grapple with.

It is possible that English has come to represent a form of Nigerian language because people have used it over time. The question is, how much of a Nigerian language is it to start with because when you present yourself outside of Nigeria as a speaker of English, people do not see you in that same way. They do not see you as a native speaker of English because you are not white, to start with, and the idea that you have spoken a language all your life does not seem to matter or make as much impact in that assessment as possible. The other is that at the expense of our local language, if all you have is that foreign language that you claim is yours, what happens to other languages? If it is a Nigerian language then there must be other languages that also support that ecosystem.

If Chinua Achebe's book, *Things Fall Apart*, exists in other languages and not in Igbo, then there is something fundamentally wrong, I believe, about that. The reason was that, before he died, he wanted to be the one to do it, from what I have been told. He did not value what everybody else had done to bring the work into Igbo because he felt it was not deep enough or that he had the most competence to do it. So, that's that.

My work has been focused on technology but also sometimes on literature. The argument I make is that the endangerment of language comes in a number of ways. One of them is lack of means of publication, for instance, to put those work outside for people to read in those languages. Because economy had gone down in the 90s and because most people stopped publishing and the publishers gave up, there is no work in Igbo, Hausa, and Yorùbá in contemporary times that people have read or can read. It means that fewer people are able to read their language and language does not survive as much as it should into the next generation. I am focusing on technology because I am a young person and young people of nowadays pay more attention to technology.

We all have phones, televisions and computers. When you go on the internet, you realize — maybe not the same here because Korea is a big language that everybody speaks — but in Nigeria, everything online is in English. Everywhere you look, TV, CNN, etc. So, English has taken over in that way. Which means English does not have any problem. It is not going to fail. It is not going to go extinct. But the other languages in the places where these technological tools are used suffer as a result. Example of my grandfather that I mentioned — he is 93, can read in Yorùbá and write in Yorùbá because he was taught in the language when he was young. Yorùbá is a tone language. He can write with the tone marks. If you write to him, he will read what you've written and will understand it and write back to you in Yorùbá as well. But he cannot read and write in English, yet he has a mobile phone and in all mobile phones, the language is English. You can change to French, German, etc. but you cannot change to Yorùbá because people have not spent enough time creating products to fit the Yorùbá audience. might be saying something embarrassing that you did not mean to say in the first place.

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Sometimes you got punished if you spoke your own language in school; that is in a country where the language is spoken. It is like you're speaking Korean now in Korea and you go to a school in Korea where the teacher says all of you must speak English while you're on the school premises and if you ever speak a word of Korean, you'll be punished.

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Yorùbá is spoken by about 30 million people within Nigeria and outside. I have noticed from the time I was in University, from using Microsoft word and seeing names underlined in red lines to say that these are not names that matter to noticing that most technological tools being created are created in big languages and not the African ones. Before, I said maybe it is because there aren't enough people using these things, but Yorùbá has 30 million people and one day I was looking through my iPad to see Siri, the automatic artificial intelligence application that speaks to you when you click and talks back. Siri speaks in English and probably Korean too. I am not sure. But I was looking through to see what languages Siri exists in and there was Swedish. I googled how many people spoke Swedish. The results were 9 – 10 million people. There was Norwegian: 5 – 6 million, Danish: 4 – 5 million. In total, these three languages in the Nordic circle were spoken by 15 – 20 million people. Three languages! Yorùbá is spoken by 30 million and nobody has thought that this language deserves to have this kind of product.

So, there is an exclusion that is happening over time. Because of that my work has been to find a way to fill that gap, by advocacy first of all in my writing. I try to write in Yorùbá. It has been hard because we were not brought up speaking as much Yorùbá as English. I'll address that later. But also because we have had to create these tools from the start as no one had done it before. We decided that — I'm a linguist, I was trained as a linguist—I'm going to use the skill I have to create opportunities for the Yorùbá language to better survive on the internet and, in doing so, hope that I encourage people who speak other languages in the country, who also feel the urgency that I feel that we are being left behind by speed and the

growth of technology to be able to also create something. So most of the tools we are creating through technology, we are making open source. All the codes are on Github so that people can go there and be able to adapt the tools to fit their own language and to be able to help it survive.

So I was going to mention how we were raised when I was growing up in Ìbàdàn. Ìbàdàn is a smaller town than Lagos. My parents who were a little different from most modern parents of the time knew the importance of speaking Yorùbá in the house even though they knew that as soon as we went out most of our friends and colleagues spoke English or other languages. So it was harder to monitor a child when he was out of the house. In the private schools we went to, English was the medium of instruction. Sometimes you got punished if you spoke your own language in school; that is in a country where the language is spoken. It is like you're speaking Korean now in Korea and you go to a school in Korea where the teacher says all of you must speak English while you're on the school premises and if you ever speak a word of Korean, you'll be punished.

That was what we went through and parents thought that was normal because they assumed that English is a language of education and economic empowerment and therefore to be able to learn it properly you have to deny yourself your tendency to speak your own language. Of course linguistic research has shown that that is a false and bullshit argument. To say that having competence in your own language will prevent you from having competence in another language is wrong. But many people still have the perception. So you have people from poor families today in the country or even middle class people — at least for poor families you can understand their thinking that maybe if they learned English they could get a better job etc., which I'm not saying is a bad thing. I'm not saying you should not learn English. But having middle class people say it to themselves: I will learn English but I will not learn my own local language or mother tongue because it will prevent me from acquiring another language is a stupid argument because is not true and it is buying into the idea that your language is inferior which is also a result of colonial domination.

One day I was on Twitter and there was this news that Twitter was expanding the translation platform of the service to include a number of other languages and as I found lately, which equally happens with many of these things, I was joking with a friend of mine that I'm sure the language they are adding is not an African language. So we went to look at it. I cannot remember what it was. I said why is Twitter not in Yorùbá already. There are many Nigerians who speak Yorùbá, who use Twitter every day and, if given a chance, they would want to tweet in their own language. Again Twitter is a place where young people work and spend all their time and if it exists in the language they can speak, it will give them more incentive to use it. I mean you can say why are people not trying to learn their mother tongue etc.? But if everywhere they look: in literature, in technology, in government, in schools, they are being told that the language does not systematically function, they automatically switch away from it. So I have been interested in finding all those ways and new ways to incorporate these language knowledge and intention and care about speaking and learning your language into those spaces.

So we decided we were going to start what we called Tweet Yorùbá day. That was in 2012 and what we were going to do was find and tell everybody on Twitter who speaks Yorùbá to tweet everything they write that day in Yorùbá no matter how good or poor they are. And that they should copy @twitter and let them know that Yorùbá is what we speak and we want Twitter to exist in the language. So we did that all day. A number of people participated. Many people did not even know why. They just saw tweet Yorùbá day trending and everybody participated. I had written a blog post explaining why we were doing this on my blog. At the end of the day, someone from Twitter must have seen it because people were speaking in this strange language they did not know or understand. They contacted me and said they've heard us and will look into it. That was 2012. In 2013, by March 1, the same time as the previous year, they had not gotten back to me. We said we were going to do it again. We named that March 1 Tweet Yorùbá day and we did the same thing all over again. Twitter did not say anything.

Then in 2014, we did the same thing. By then so many people had heard about it. So, later in August that year, someone sent me a tweet saying (this person worked with Twitter): I have something to show you and then I saw it — the translation for the Twitter platform is now available in Yorùbá and Esperanto. They opened the platform and invited writers and speakers of Yorùbá to come and help them translate and we did that. It took months. They have not yet launched that Twitter Yorùbá. But at least they opened the platform and we have been able to do that and that gives me hope that if you want something to happen you have to work for it, have to try and make effort. There is still a long way to go for my language and Yorùbá is just one language. There are several languages in the country. As a linguist I'm interested in the survival of all these languages. I want all the languages we have in Nigeria to thrive. That is a very ambitious and sometimes an unrealistic expectation because there are so many languages there. Some will die no matter what you do. But I am interested in providing opportunities through the skills I have as a linguist, as a technological savvy person to create opportunities for anyone who speaks any of these languages to thrive to bring whatever knowledge they have of that language to mix it with technology and create opportunities for young people who care enough to use it. If we do not do this, we are losing the language at the end of the day.

With literature, I have tried to write Yorùbá. It is hard. As a writer, I came into writing from the English angle even though my father is a writer as well. He has written in Yorùbá. At least he grew up in an environment where English was not a factor. It was just there in the periphery and Yorùbá was everything they did. So, I have been trying to get back to that stage where I can write creatively in Yorùbá. I am working hard on that. One of my works has been in writing the effect of language endangerment and showing the opportunities that exist today in literature or governance. I have suggested that presidents of Nigeria for instance, whenever they travel abroad should try to speak their language to the audience they are speaking to because most times there is a translator around that can interpret what you're saying. That way, you can show the people you're meeting that you speak a different language and this language works, and when the people in your country hear you speaking your language abroad, they have more pride in that language and they might want to use it

as well.

Many people have challenged that argument because there are so many languages in the country, which one does the president use? If a president is using one, is he excluding the other? My response has been presidents come and go. One president will come, he might speak Hausa, another will come, he will speak Yorùbá, and another will speak Igbo. Over time, we will get into ourselves and people observing our country will understand the multiplicity that exists within the language situation in Nigeria. It will help the language better develop.

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One of the essays I wrote some years ago about Tejú Cole, who is a very important brilliant Nigerian writer, was about his book of essays called *Known and Strange Things* and many of the names he mentioned were Swedish (like Tranströmer) and German names etc., with special diacritics and all. He wrote them all properly. But whenever he was writing Yorùbá names and Yorùbá words, he wrote them bland without any mark, which was jarring to me.

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Most of you are familiar with Nigerian writers: Tejú Cole, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chinua Achebe, Wólé Sáyínká etc. Like I said they came from a different generation of writers so they wrote mostly in English. But also they surrendered to a kind of British-imposed or Western-imposed idea of how to write literature. I am giving an example of the writing style — the diacritic marks in Yorùbá. Yorùbá is a tone language like Chinese. A word can mean different things depending on the kind of diacritic tone it has. A word like ọwọ means hand. Ọwọ means respect. Owó means money, while ọwọ is broom. These words have just o-w-o and depending on the kind of sign you put on it, you might confuse the person that is listening. Yorùbá scholars have, over time, done some work in orthography and created how to best express Yorùbá in text. One of the reasons I am reading about Korean writing style is that I am interested in observing what kind of opportunities exist to create a new writing style that people will be more familiar with. Currently what we have is an orthography that involves putting the diacritical marks. With those diacritical marks, you might want to say one thing and mean another. There's a word in Yorùbá that can mean husband or hoe or vehicle or penis; and, depending on who you're talking to, if you do not mark it well you might be saying something embarrassing that you did not mean to say in the first place.

When people: Chinua Achebe, Wólé Sáyínká were writing, they were writing with English

minds and so when they get to Yorùbá expressions that they want to include in the writing, they do not include the marks. If you look at the paper in front of you, and you see how my name is written; those are the marks I am talking about. Most Nigerians today have not learned how to use it because they grew up in generations where their parents did not teach them how to do it or they did not care and do not think it is important and that is the kind of generation Wọlé Sọyínká, Tejú Cole and the rest of them came from. I find that embarrassing. The idea of having the literature of a country is to be able to embody the cultural – everything that matters about that environment. And I think that even though you are writing in English, when you are writing text that has to do with Yorùbá, you should pay attention to express that language as properly as possibly.

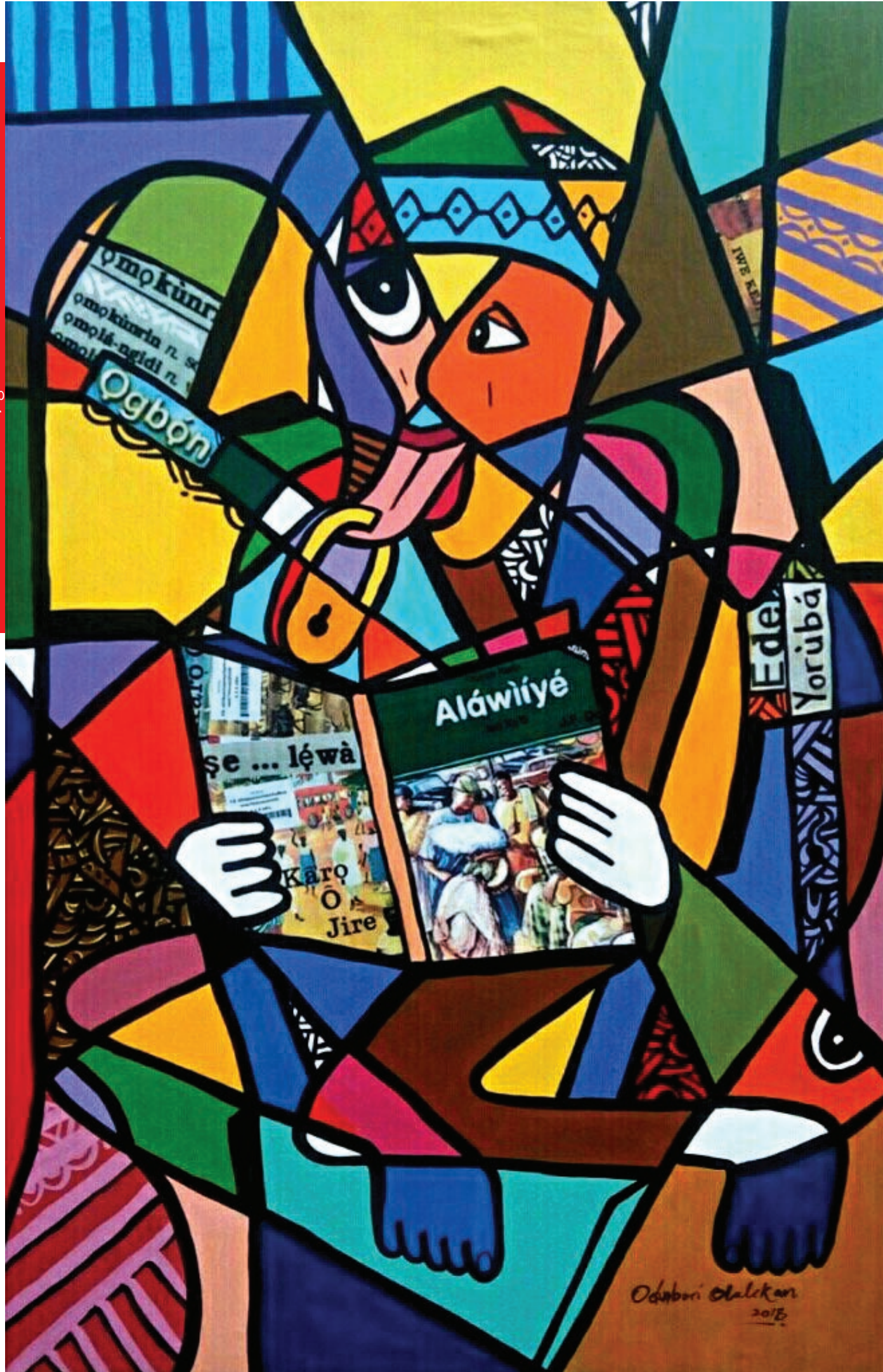
The irony for me and why it makes it so sad and upsetting is that these same people when they meet a French name in their writing will write them properly with the accent (like what you find on *café*, for instance) and everything that comes in French. When they are writing in Swedish, it's the same. One of the essays I wrote some years ago about Tejú Cole, who is a very important brilliant Nigerian writer, was about his book of essays called *Known and Strange Things* and many of the names he mentioned were Swedish (like *Tranströmer*) and German names etc., with special diacritics and all. He wrote them all properly. But whenever he was writing Yorùbá names and Yorùbá words, he wrote them bland without any mark, which was jarring to me.

I have said in a number of my writing that one of the things we need to do as Africans to better express ourselves is to first understand who we are and try to have a conversation about how we want to present ourselves and, you know, get out of that mindset that the British have put us into over time, and maybe in doing that we might come to what is truly African literature. I do not have a problem with African literature being in English, some of them being in English, but I also want a situation where the majority of African literature is not just in English, or in French or in Portuguese which are all languages that were brought into the place. Before those people came, we told stories, and we found a way to communicate and to share ideas and knowledge and we should be able continue doing that even if we have to translate them back to English, which is not a problem. Places like Korea have shown us how it would work. My task is to learn from places like this, places like Wales, like Kenya, like South Africa and other places that have tapped into the knowledge base of the local language and used it to better themselves in literature, in education, in politics and most importantly technology.

I will welcome your questions now. I hope you read the essay and let me know if you have any questions even when I'm gone. But this is generally an overview of what I do, why I do it, and the kinds of challenges I've been looking forward to.

Thank you so much.

*Talk transcribed by Ope Adédèjì*



# Still Life with the Evangelist

Logan February

*have you heard the gospel?*

– did you know                      that birdsong is older  
than a rooster's call                      i'm sorry  
i know not to answer a question  
with a question      i just find that  
very fascinating

*have you heard the gospel?*

– my name means a promise was kept  
i never sleep      of course      i hear things

*what did you think of it?*

– i understand that someone  
has to die      for me to be free  
i just think                      that someone  
is too often      me

*where did you go astray?*

– the problem is always                      love  
the problem is always      my heart  
i'm trying to say                      it all started  
with      the birdsong

*what do you believe?*

– i believe                      i am too young  
to be such a withered thing

*what do you believe?*

– i would say                      i'm a buddhist  
because      breathing      is something  
people like me have to learn  
and      living is such a difficult task  
almost like                      swimming

*do you even want salvation?*

– it started with love      i changed  
my name      and a promise was broken

*what do you mean?*

– i mean i loved myself once  
and i never looked back

*do you even want salvation?*

– don't tell me lies      we both know  
someone has to die      for that  
to be real

*do you know this is something you need?*

– yes      but a chest with good lungs  
is also something      i need  
do you see my problem

*what do you mean?*

– listen to me      i never breathe

*so what happens after you die?*

– i'll be honest with you      the only  
real reason      i believe in reincarnation is  
is that      i was too young      when i  
discovered nostalgia

*how old were you?*

– i heard it in a bird's song  
i think      i was eight  
when my father      died

*do you want me to stop?*

– i've told you      i cannot continue  
this way      it makes me wither

*are you sure?*

– of course i'm sure      i never  
sleep      i have ample time  
to decide      these things      i'm saying  
everything that echoes      is a name



Olalekan Odubori, *Co-existence*, 2018

# INTERVIEW

## Jekein Lato-Unah

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*This is one in a seven-part interview series featuring selected artists using various media. We try to go under the hood of the artist's craft.*

**To open the seal, we will like to know some things about you; your background, growing up, why and how you became an artist.**

My name is Jekein Lato-Unah and I was born on the 4th of September, 1996. I am a multi-dimensional and experimental artist born and bred in Lagos, Nigeria. I am also currently a fourth year Law student at the University of Lagos. Originally self-taught, I decided to undergo somewhat formal training. At 16, I began working with ceramics under the watch of Prof. Ndubuisi of Yabat-ech as I had always been fascinated with the idea of creation and creating things. I went ahead to bag certificates in pottery, painting and performance art from Art Basis Institute, Dubai. Subsequently, I began painting and selling my work. In 2016, I studied and worked under Jelili Atiku and he held a performance art exhibition which was sponsored by ArtHouse Contemporary and The Goethe-Institut titled "A Day Exhibition." It was held at the ArtHouse Residency where I was both a participant and the exhibition's Art

Director.

**How would you describe your art form?**

My art form is a mixture of fauvism and Araism, using mostly oil paint on canvas and furniture. My subjects involve regular people as the common denominators of our personal environment.

**How do you work and what inspires your work?**

I work in the garage in my home, usually scantily clad because I'm most comfortable that way so I'm reluctant to let people into my space. I'm currently known as the only woman in the Araism movement and I'm glad I chose this particular art form. My work is a response to my space, based on my interaction with my immediate environment and it conveys social, political and cultural issues in a thought-provoking manner that sparks discourse. Although my work may contain a lot of negativity, it is a direct reflection of the environment in which we Nigerians have found ourselves. However, there is positivity twisted into the fabric of that negativity

and I ensure that my work represents that as well.

**Someone once said, "Good art should disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed". What message/messages do you try to convey to the audience via your art?**

A lot of my work focuses on the less than ideal concepts that women have been subjected to-- patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism. There is so much talk about them and incorporating these topics which I am passionate about, into my work acts not only as an outlet for me as a woman but as a reminder to people that these things exist. Art has always played an important role in the representation of social ills and my work is one of the many ways I contribute to these conversations. Hopefully, from confronting each other with these issues, we can come up with solutions to them.

**We are sure you are familiar with a couple of African artist dead or alive. Which of them has been your biggest influence?**

Women like Ndidie Emefiele, Ndidie Dike, Njideka Akunyili-Crosby and Peju Alatise have been my biggest influencers in the industry so far.

**What will you say is your favourite thing about being an artist?**

My favourite part of being an artist is definitely the appreciation & connection people feel when they see my work. I'm filled with joy when they resonate deeply with what I've created and even when they don't buy my art, the conversation that it inspires between people is fulfilling.

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**Like any other discipline making art definitely has its downsides. What have you observed to be the downsides of being an artist?**

The biggest downside is the undervaluation of my work which is worsened by the fact that I am a woman. As a Nigerian in Nigeria, I know that artists aren't appreciated enough. Everybody likes art but nobody wants to buy it for fear of making a bad investment. Also, like several other industries, the Nigerian art scene is male-dominated. This in itself is discouraging and when coupled with the belief that women cannot be as creative as their male counterparts, it makes things worse. However, I put these notions behind me and work hard to put them to shame. Also, the sexual harassment that comes with being a woman in a male-dominated industry is tough. People like me who are "emerging artists," face the possibility of ostracism in the industry if we call out the gallery owners, artists, collectors and other perpetrators of these acts. The time will come when people will have the courage to speak up, but will anything be done about it? Find out in a couple of years.

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**We like to see Art as a life form chiefly because it evolves and new trends can spring up from anywhere. What art trends are you following at the moment?**

Currently, I'm researching and documenting the everyday life of different subjects including myself, working with bold wall colours in cold tones complimented by bright and warm colors using my Araism technique.

**When/how do you know a piece of art is finished?**

My artwork is considered finished when I no longer question it.

**In recent times, the spotlight has been on African art especially from the West. What is your opinion on the art scene in your country and Africa art large?**

The spotlight should always be on Africa, nobody does it like us. The art scene in Nigeria is elitist and hinges on favouritism. Also, at every corner, there are people who would like to take advantage of you and your talent.

Follow [@jekein](#) on Instagram to experience more from Jekein Lato-Unah

Follow [@agbowoart](#) on Instagram to discover more exciting art from various artists.

Jekein Lato-Unah,  
*Silence*, 2018



# The Looking Painting

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Xola Stemele

There's this odd painting in our shack. It's of an unusual house with one window. This house is camouflaged with several corners. The corners obviously embody their own cornery story, detached in breath and hasty in close. Like shortcuts with no twists. Nonetheless, you must remove what is in front to see what is behind. Simple, everywhere besides in proper sketch of fact. That one window is for everyone to see, designed by an artist with a slick mind. His slickness obvious in the locus of the window and in its vocally unexplainable size. A window as large as the human eye, very large yet very small. Squashable with a lifeless knife, yet strong enough to escape. This window sees everything; looking in and out like a see-through mirror. Everything fits through it, but the window is still minor. Noticeable only in solitude, meaning you have to talk through the sights, heights and its imposing noise. You inescapably spend your whole life trying to explain what you have seen, only to discover that you have held on to a windowed narrative. An Outside illustration of what is really going on inside.

The slick artist is my late uncle Risto. He died depressed from being exiled from South Africa for more than 15 years. He left when bullets and even more bullets were attempting to silence the uprising of the black youth. He fled and left my father behind. Uncle Risto was an artist as well as an intense actor. He performed in provocative plays that ignited mass intellectual fires and buoyant pride among black people. In his last play called "how much is your bible", Out of nowhere, helicopters, flying squads and a group of absorbed black Christians came in swiftly attempting to lock him away for the longest time. Uncle Risto succeeded in escaping the scene just in time before they could catch him. Before he left for exile, he left the painting that dangles on the zinc of our shack. He never explained its meaning, all he said to my father was:

*"This house needs to be seen by those without,"* he said no more.

This all happened prior to my birth in April 93'. Regrettably, Chris Hani was killed a day before I was born. This day is memorable to my father who embraced me with a melancholic rejoice. A rather sombre entrance into this world. A bittersweet taste left by the dead expectations of Hani's plan, which my father had utter faith in. My father has now put his faith in the selling of Uncle Risto's painting. He floats away from day to day to a place I have never been. At times, it worries me in not being able to relate. To my father, reality is a compromise that is continuously summarised in his daily utterings.

*"Your generation has no energy, none whatsoever, we are in trouble son, we are in big trouble"*

My father's landscape is also mine. I have no choice but to see what he shows me. Even though sometimes I cannot see. I am afraid that if we do not sell this painting, my father too

will lose his sanity. The only problem is that my father does not see that this painting will never be seen within this shack. To me it is obvious, maybe young eyes cannot grasp onto the full picture. Things to me are not as bad as they appear. There is beauty beneath the slums we call Voluku Township. The shallow pit of Voluku has swollen a lot of the dreams our elders have found shelter in. Their hopes of finally receiving houses is now buried with those who wrote their names on those puzzling papers back when freedom was declared. Things that make no sense my father says.

*"Son, we will sell this painting and buy ourselves a house on the mountain where Angels have their beer (chuckles), believe me."*

This shack is a momentary home that was built by my father a long time ago, the time when he was forcefully removed from his home in a beautiful area called "Kwanobuhle", which later changed to "God's Town" in the late 80's. I have never been there but know how it looks. It's very smart and simple. This is the place he often drifts to, his house in back in "God's Town".

*"Tata, this painting needs to be seen, we must take it down and show it to some people"*

*"My boy, do not worry. It will be seen; people just need to get past its endless corners. But eventually, they will."*

How? I do not know. Uncle Risto killed himself compelled by an unrelenting depression. The realness of being disconnected from the country of your birth. He could not take it. My father tells me also of writers such as Nat Nakasa who jumped off a building in the bleakness of the exiled. Nakasa was not allowed to come back and neither were other notorious artists like my Uncle Risto. My head is now filled with the holistic view of yesterday's remnants. Things people my age cannot see.

This is the burden I have been blessed with. The ability to see past in the present. This country has concealed everything. The unpleasant things are hidden beneath our artificial rainbow. Dulled by the dominance of one colour. My father says that the truth is as plain as day. He says this every other day, yet never continues on to say what this truth is.

This year I am turning 11, and yet to begin formal schooling. For the past 3 years, I have been home-schooled by my father's friend Diski. Diski told me that *"Life is attention"*. On the first day he told me I am where I am. Where your attention is, is where you are too. He tells me that my father cannot see past the impasse of this country's unspeakable history.

*"Your father is nuts, but he loves you. You and Risto's painting is all he has"*

The rich white people do not even come close to Vokutu, they do not want to bother knowing where it is, it is not even on their fancy map. Vokutu is known only by its people. My father says Vokutu is like a horrible murky stain on a crisp white shirt. You cannot wait until you finally get it sorted.

*"They are coming! In the morning they will come, if they don't, then surely tomorrow. But they are coming!"* My father says.

Last year we had a visit from a funny looking black man wearing a shiny suit. He spoke out of his nose and made abnormal movements. He warned us about the likelihood of a wrecked Vokutu. Plans were being established on the project of a new mall that would lure rich folks from far away areas. He spoke quick so that we could not properly hear him. But my father is smart. Maybe smarter.

*"Will he remove us? Please people of Vokutu, tell this man what a fool he is"* My father said this and the people soon enough intervened.

The strange man was talking English and only my father and couple of other past revolutionaries could hear him. Once things were translated, people started growling, grimacing as if they were envisioning the man's death. They have already been displaced, twice would be the evil spirits labour. And unfortunately the outlandish man served as a wicked impersonation of yesterday's evil.

*"Makahambe lomntu"* is what the people of Vokutu shouted. This man must go. And indeed he left with his glistening suit and his impressive car. Since that day, my father is tense and constantly bothered. This other day he snapped at Uncle Diski for getting a date wrong in our history lesson.

*"Diski don't teach my child nonsense man! Our children are already being misled. Voetsek! Leave this place"*

Uncle Diski understands my father better than most. He took his books and left us to ponder on the situation. That is the last time I saw him. From then I have been learning from my father's stories and through the discussions of the elders who casually drink even when opportunity does not arise. Bitter and humble men. They too have seen uncle Risto's painting but they too could not comprehend its meaning or worth.

*"Charlie you will not even get a beer for this, your brother was a lousy artist. Who draws such a small window? Yeses Risto was crazy"*

The comments are sharp enough to pierce a man's bladder and make him piss all over the floor. The elders could not get past the corners of the painting, never mind its window. The pang of words sliced my father into an exposed shell. He wept uncontrollably and quickly ushered them out. His hope was dangling in front of me, as if it would fall like a teardrop unattended. I too cried that day in confusion. If my father loses hope then what is left of me?

*"Tata please! Do not lose faith in uncle Risto's painting, please tata"*

*"What faith? Go outside and play"*

My father knows very well that in Vokutu we do not play. The heaps of rubbish carry venoms that puncture a person's condition. The situation is increased by the abandoning of

ripe waste, unflushed. In Vokutu, there are no toilets. So I say, *"Tata, when they come, show them Uncle Risto's painting"*

"Who? What are you talking about? "To my father, such a resolve is worse than hunching your back low, and offering yourself effortlessly to oppression from the white man. That is something he cannot see himself doing. Unlike some of the others in Vokutu, my father observed killings that no man should see in one lifetime. As a result, it left him unable to isolate past from present in the presence of Europeans.

*"Tata we can sell the painting to the rich white folks who will come hoping to devastate us"*

*"No! What do you know about rich white folk? What do you know about Risto's painting? Get-away!"*

As much as I listen, I do not really talk. I keep to myself and create scenarios in my mind of how things should naturally work out. I am simply an eyewitness and not a shaper of this reality. There are older people to do that. I keep trying hoping that I can get through to my stubborn father. He curses me. I try harder and he curses louder.

*"I will fuck you up, do you hear me? Go away with that sympathetic desperation of yours. Otherwise, you will be disciplined."*

Time passes and my father hardly glances at uncle Risto's painting. He can no longer bare to even look. Before that, the painting gave him faith for the day, it made him remember the bigger picture, which is finally getting our own house. These days he has lost it.

*"Maybe you should go away for some time and live with your cousins in Shwela"*

*"No Tata, my cousins are stupid. I want to stay here with you and sell this painting"*

*"What did I say about talking about that painting?"*

If I leave him, I am afraid he will follow Uncle Risto's example and kill himself. It is the worst to assume but my father has no longer any life in him. It is clear even to the window of Uncle Risto's painting. One day I decided to search for Uncle Diski and ask him for some transport money. I could not tell him why but I told him that if he helped me then God would help him. Somehow, he agreed and gave me enough to go to town and back. For the first time, I was attempting to leave Vokutu by myself in order to sell that painting and get us a small house. My only problem would be explaining its worth and importance to someone who wished to buy it. While my father was away, I took it down and put it in my stride, and then proceeded towards the passing taxis at the edge of Vokutu. Thankfully, I got a small taxi to take me to town. Everyone in the taxi kept staring at uncle Risto's painting, which was sitting on top of me. Some were looking in amazement of its small window and some were looking out of common boredom. When we reached town I asked to get out. I would now go to every fancy looking building and show them what I had with me. I passed by many buildings without any interest, I was now hungry and tired. Sad and lonely. Regretful on why I had made such an unwise decision. This painting will obviously never sell.

As I walked towards the taxis, a skinny looking man calls me to come to him. I tell him to come to me.

*"Hey wena, where are you going with that odd painting?"*

*"I am going to sell it so that my father can buy us a house. My father says this painting is worth a lot"*

*"Now where is your father? Does he know that you are here?"*

After he said this, I realised that he would not buy it. He did not have the money to afford it. Whatever the amount was, he did not have it.

*"Sorry, I have to go try some more people."*

As I leave he tells me to stop and give him the painting, he says he just wants to have a look. I do not trust him but nonetheless I give it to him.

*"Okay so how much?" he asks me.*

*"How much does a house cost?"*

At first he does not bother to answer me, after a long pause he tells me that there is an Art Gallery downtown and they are the most likely to buy such a confusing painting. Before we get there, he tells me to say that the painting symbolises "the eye of God" or something along those lines. This was supposed to bring fascination and intrigue to the mind of the gallery owner. When we get there, it is closed, I ask him what we should do now and he tells me to "Voetsek". The painting was now his and I should go home before I lose even more. He left me crying. Cursing my own stupidity in trusting a stranger. My father would now kill me for taking down the painting and coming back without it. I took a taxi home and told the driver I was going to Vokutu. The others in the taxi laughed at me for saying this.

When I get home, my father is sitting in the bedroom with his head concentrated on the space where Uncle Risto's painting was. He is silent and most likely upset. The silence is tense and stiff. I decide to say something that will make him talk.

*"Tata have you seen uncle Diski today? He was asking about you."*

*He does not answer. Nothing. "Tata?"*

As I get closer, I notice his eyes are open but he does not flutter an eyelid. He is motionless. He does not even look at me. I shake him and his whole body sways. I try hitting him and he does not even react.

My father has lost his sanity. He has gone beyond the ledge. The one he has avoided his whole life. He is now undone. Looking. Looking in and out and not saying a single word. My father is now like the window in Uncle Risto's painting, Lifeless and meaningful.

# On Desire

Tade Ipadeola

So the thing I want the most to do is ask  
Why Cleopatra's Needle pierces history  
From Luxor to Paris, London and New York  
Why Muhammad Ali gave our monument away?

But you know that that can't be true  
The thing I want to do the most is touch  
That heat lodged in the core of desire  
When she wields her warrior's cry.

The thing I want to feel the most is time  
As river or ether, perhaps both  
Tied to timelessness inside her warmth  
Who is the girl with eyes I always loved.

Those things I tend to want the most are shy  
And obstinate as fuck when I pursue  
And so I learnt to wait the while I live  
For then the things I want the most come in.

**Segun Okewumi.** *Realm  
of Love.* 2018.



# INTERVIEW

## Olalekan Odunbori

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*This is one in a seven-part interview series featuring selected artists using various media. We try to go under the hood of the artist's craft.*

**To open the seal, we will like to know some things about you; your background, growing up, why and how you became an artist.**

My name is Olalekan Odunbori and I hail from Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria. When I was a kid, I discovered I could draw and ever since then, I've been practicing art. While growing up, I was exposed to art based on cultural festivals in my hometown. The Egungun festival was one of them. Then, I used to see different paintings of masquerades done at the entrance of each household that participated in the festival and I was fascinated by the detailing on the paintings and the flamboyant costumes worn by the masquerades. The passion I have for drawing and painting made me choose the art class in High School and I picked fine art as one of my subjects. After which I studied visual art at Yaba College of Technology, where I obtained a Higher National Diploma in Painting. All these are the reasons why I am an artist today.

**How would you describe your art form?**

My art is semi-abstract and it is under a movement called cubism. With my works, I tell stories with the infusions of African motifs and patterns. My art is also a means of communicating to people on issues we tend to neglect in the society.

**How do you work and what inspires your work?**

I start by stretching and priming my canvas and if it's drawing I intend to do, I make sure I sort for the right paper to use. Then, I brainstorm on the idea and prepare a sketch for the work. After that, I decide on the colour scheme I want to use for the work before I start painting. One funny thing though is my bath time is one of my favourite moments. Most of the themes of my works were conceived while in the bathroom. The ills of the society inspire my work because I believe artists are prophets sent from God to the masses so as to enlighten them to change their ways of living for the betterment of the world.

**Someone once said, "Good art should disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed". What message/messages do you try to convey to the audience via your art?**

My works are filled with a message of hope, love, unity and the fact that we need to embrace our culture as a people.

**We are sure you are familiar with a couple of African artist dead or alive. Which of them has been your biggest influence?**

Professor Yusuf Grillo and Victor Ehikhamenor are my biggest influences.

**What will you say is your favourite thing about being an artist?**

My favourite thing about being an artist is the fact that I can use my work to address the issues that are affecting the society.

**Like any other discipline making art definitely has its downsides. What have you observed to be the downsides of being an artist?**

The biggest downsides to being an artist that I have observed is that some collectors will price your work at a lower rate just because you don't have a big name yet. Another downside is that people will criticize your work even though you are giving your best. So, you have no option but to cope with it.

**When/how do you know a piece of art is finished?**

When I take a look at the work from afar and I don't see any reason why I should add any further detail to the work.

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masses.

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**In recent times, the spotlight has been on African art especially from the West. What is your opinion on the art scene in your country and Africa art large?**

The art scene in Nigeria and Africa at large is fast growing. Many foreign collectors are beginning to collect more African art. Arthouse Contemporary limited is doing a great job in auctioning African art. Earlier this year, late Ben Enwonwu's Tutu was sold for an African record of £1.2 million at Bonhams auction in London which is a great boost for the African art market. Also, there are so many initiatives for the support of young artists. Artxlagos is one of these initiatives and I believe very soon, things are going to turn out really good for African artists.

**We like to see Art as a life form chiefly because it evolves and new trends can spring up from anywhere. What art trends are you following at the moment?**

The art trends I'm following at the moment are abstraction and Afrocentric art.

Follow [@lekanskillz](#) on Instagram to experience more from Olalekan Odubori.

Follow [@agbowoart](#) on Instagram to discover more exciting art from various artists.



Olalekan Odubori, *Tomorrow is Looking Good*, 2018

# In Ibadan

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Feyisayo Anjorin

Ishola omo Aderohunmu, why are you pushing me to raging flames with your words?

Maybe you have not heard about that fool who accidentally disrobed an egungun when this city was still a hamlet. The unmasked egungun, the revealed Ara Orun was then derisively mocked by women and children in an open marketplace full of people! Our people say if a woman looks at Oro, Oro will carry her. That was why the Alaafin of Oyo – the reigning king of that time – commanded the destruction of Eba Odan. I'm sure you must be wondering how I got to know this. It's Google, dude I've been learning as much as I can about this city.

It is the wisdom gained from other people's experiences that restrains us from calling old folks 'mad'.

This is my sixth month in Ibadan, this is just the beginning of my life! My brother, I have a bright future in this city! So don't take me for a fool. You've heard what happened to me, and you want me to act fast and fight for my dignity; you want me to be a bit more assertive, to act like a real Yoruba man.

Indeed, I don't think you know what it means to be a Yoruba man. If you had seen me that evening – with my faded blue boxer shorts and hairy thin legs and the singlet that was once pure white, smelling of locust bean – if you had seen the glamour I was up against, you would have praised me for being an akinkanju.

The Ibadan of the past – that hamlet of rebels – would have been gone forever if Lagelu and his followers had not taken thought of their inadequacies in the face of battle and escaped the fiery judgement of the Alaafin. They had to flee to a nearby hill to survive on oro and igbin; later they were able to cultivate some millet and corn to make pap. Our people say an akinkanju is known by his ability to know when to fight and when to run.

Ibadan is a city today because Lagelu knew when to fight and when to run. A child who is yet to take control of a sword should not ask for the cause of his father's death.

A few weeks ago Chief Amuda – with skin the colour of amala, and fat lips – was, as far as I was concerned, just a big man in agbada and fila, cutting tapes to commission one thing or the other, giving cliché speeches behind lecterns having the seal of the state government.

I've come to know the face very well. You can never miss his framed pictures on the walls of government offices, you will even see the picture in banks; you will see his name under the photograph: His Excellency Chief Jamiu Korede Amuda, Governor of Oyo State.

I knew his town by the tribal marks on his face. But when I saw him face to face that evening as I stood by the roadside with Tosin, he was shorter than my impression of his height, he was darker than my impression of his complexion and his skin glowed in a way the pictures and videos had not been detailed enough to reveal.

Eba Odan, by the roadside, Ibadan. If you are standing by the roadside, you are probably waiting for somebody who would soon stop to walk away with you, or waiting for someone to take you somewhere. You could be standing by the roadside because your house is near; or maybe that dimly lit room – where men with the required fee would be taken for that sweet release – is near; and it could be because of your need for a ride to your destination.

Certainly there are those few who would stand by the roadside and watch like a hawk, for the police, or for those who have been known as regulars, who would shake hands with them and walk away with that wrap of igbo. You would never see the money or the wrap; all you would see is a handshake.

No one just stands by the roadside. That memorable evening was not my first time; and it would not be my last, so why do you expect me to make a mountain out of a molehill?

We – me and my favourite girl – were standing by the roadside so that Tosin could get a taxi to Iwo road. Tosin – in her white short-sleeved shirt, black knee-length skirt, and heels – was a stunner as usual that evening. You know what that girl would do to men when her legs are seen in all their glory! I wanted her to spend the night with me but she said she wanted to go home to be able to attend a vigil – from nine until dawn – at a church on her street, so I agreed with her because we really needed the prayers. Good things need prayers to abide, bad things need prayers for change. As far as I was concerned, in that fantasy universe that was so real to me at that point, ours was a good thing.

I was surprised when His Excellency's convoy of new black cars with tinted windows slowed down near us and parked by the roadside.

While I was still wondering what could be the reason for the unexpected stop, His Excellency came down from the car, walked towards us, ignored me like an angry man would ignore the performance of a clown with a red nose and painted face, and stretched his hand to greet Tosin with a smile.

She took his hand, she did not let it go, or maybe it was His Excellency that did not let it go. I've never seen her smile like that before; it was a desperately coquettish smile.

"I'm Jamiu." he said as if she could possibly not know his name.

"Tosin."

"Tosin. That's a sweet name. Where are you headed?" the Governor asked with a wink, in the manner of a man who could confidently take a woman to a mall and ask her to buy anything she wants without being bothered by the possibility of unbridled choices. "Such a beautiful complexion should not be spoiled by the sun."

"There is no sun in the sky." I said curtly. But no one seemed to care.

His excellency was now very close to my treasured lady, as if a movie director is about to take a two-shot close up of the two; he placed his hand around her waist and got no hint of resistance. "You live around these parts?"

That was when my lot changed, it must have been the suggestive tone of the question, it was an opportunity Tosin had been unconsciously waiting for. That was when I became a brother. That was when I knew it was over.

"No sir," Tosin said with a pouty smile. "I came to see my brother. I'm just waiting for a taxi to get me to lwo road."

Chief didn't even bother to look at Tosin's *brother*. "lwo road? I will take you there, if you don't mind." He said. "In fact, I will get you to your house or wherever it is you plan to go."

I've never been a pessimist; to be sincere, I believed so much in our love. I would never have imagined Tosin would ever speak of me as she did when His Excellency made his intentions known with words and body language; I could not have imagined my favourite girl would do something like that.

I had great plans for this woman. I may not be rich, but isn't it true thoughts counts more than deeds in matters of love? One could do so much without putting one's heart in it. I was with this woman, heart and soul. I was the one planning a wedding with this lady. I had painted pictures in my heart; I had told more than a dozen people about our plans to take our love to the next level.

A few minutes after Tosin left with Chief I dialled her number, she didn't pick my call. I dialled again, and again, and again. I dialled again after a few hours, I was awake for most of the night. I dialled again the following morning.

I was at her house in the evening, I mean the place where we had spent time together, listening to music, reminiscing on our campus years, talking about our future, sharing meals and kisses and warmth; when I got there hoping to find her.....she was gone. She was already with a man who could channel some money to change her fantasies to reality in a few hours, and had done just that.

I had to bear the hurt for days, for weeks, I had to stomach the humiliation for a while.

Now I'm over it.

Look, it's not about knowing Ibadan, there is a lot you can deduce from your interactions with people; what is essential is a bird's eye view; you have to know Layipo too. I think your work as a filmmaker has coloured your perception so much that you find it hard to get a firm grasp on reality. You see love with the eyes of those young boys with their cheesy love songs about "*catching grenades for you* " and "*dying on top of the matter* " and "*not loving Ferrari or designer but only my love.*"

That must be the reason for your push, your encouragement, your anger, your persistent motivation; I love this girl isn't it? I have to let the bastard know he can't just go about snatching other people's girlfriend.

Hello Aderohunmu! She was a girlfriend! Not wife! He didn't force her. I have no advantage whatsoever, and your anger is as impotent as mine.

I was a young man who would take my dearly beloved woman to that shack restaurant at Ojuirin Bodija, we would sit on rickety wooden tables, we would shout our orders like other hungry customers, we would swat flies with one hand and work on our amala and gbegiri with the other, we would fan ourselves with old newspapers. We would cross the road to Bodija market, buy our meats in the smelly abattoir at Kara where sellers would touch the meat with the same hands they had used to wipe mucus from their noses, we would buy our foodstuff from women who would curse your mother's thing if you annoy them with your inconsiderate bargain.

I hope you know there are malls in this city, air conditioned, spacious, appealing; one could take a picture in the malls and post it on Facebook, to build the false impression of being in the US, Europe or South Africa. Are you following Tosin on Instagram? You need to follow her on Instagram.

I still live in a room with torn dusty nets, a place where rats, roaches and mosquitoes move about freely, as in a dust bin. You need to be here when it rains; I'd have to run to the kitchen for bowls, I'd need four to keep the floor of my room from getting wet. I share a kitchen with three other tenants, a kitchen with walls blackened by smoke; and the toilets stink so much that Tosin vomited the first time she entered it. To face facts: In terms of comfort, what do I really have to offer this beautiful woman?

I hope you know Chief is running for second term? Even if Ibadan is not my final destination I think it is better to stand by the roadside too, to accept free rides that providence brings, like politicians, changing their parties every four years, shamed as political prostitutes but shameless about the whole thing. I've been learning a lot from them!

I could utilize the opportunity presented by Tosin's opportunistic closeness to the Governor. It would not cost Chief anything to help Tosin's brother with a contract, an appointment, something for the *boy* to start *something*. I sent Tosin a message on Facebook. She would know I am not as angry as she thinks, she could put a good word for me. Who knows what could happen?

Ibadan, the house of Oluyole, where the thief could be justified by eloquence: "*Why did you place this treasure where it could be stolen?*" "Aderohunmu, I would rather leave chief alone; I would rather not pretend that I have a power I really don't have. I have fused Lagelu's experience of this city's beginning to the resources at my disposal.

I have decided to be at peace with the big man at Eba Odan, so that I can "*rohunmu*" in Ibadan.

# Requiem for a Fly in the Froth

Tunji Olalere

*Mege tweeted:*

*If not for Jehovah  
they would have dug the earth  
for cocoyam on my grave,  
but would I have known?*

I

This is for the housefly  
that went all the way down.  
Its swollen belly ripe with life's cloying  
its sodden wings steadfast to the end.

Having gone from dung to open sewers  
from over-ripe mangoes to party left-overs  
having washed its fingers in festering wounds  
perch after perch left its throat parched

And crazed with an aromatic thirst  
it spun a tortuous buzz around the glass  
taking giddy bearings between the froth,  
sunset's cerise, and the swatting palm.

One thing must kill a man, they say,  
life does not stretch like a gun's barrel.

II

Igba melo la o lo laye  
teni n ma se faaji...

Hear the crunch of life between my teeth  
this is not sugarcane, this is bone cracked  
for its succulent marrow  
sucked for blood's sweetness.

Attend quickly to this matter

this riddle the talking-drums have dropped,  
the left palm snug on the occiput  
the right conducting the waist's weave

Bata... bata... bata... bata...

All of the dance may be in the head,  
whether the heel-spin or the cobra-weave,  
Shoki may skew the Gaussian for retarded humanity  
but Windek is not for windswept knees.

These songs remain a law unto themselves,  
sounds breath-broken into cadences of magic,  
armless, legless, yet able to drag ashore,  
classics are sonic fractals for the ears:  
hear the pluripotency of Mafikizolo.

### III

Awon temi l'Agbowo,  
nawo nawo nawo nawo

Spenders manic  
drifters for the sheer drifting  
this is to the froth's fly  
to the life that eats with ten fingers

Let us dig, debt-deep, bottomed-out:

Are we not twisted shapes of childhood's anvil?  
Are we not agnostics on Dionysian reveries?  
Are we not actors on a Pinter Pause?

Or are we flies,  
mere froth flies  
who stayed true to the cask?

### IV

The glint of cognac as light catches the flute's eye,  
amber spirits or glass-ghommids,  
somebody has brewed a god in a burning goblet  
and night has burst into a neon-song --

Oblivion is the judgment of the living  
immortality is the vanity of the dead.

Let dawn find us sprawled and spent  
tired of nauseous bearings between the bed and the bowl  
wondering why some refused to drag a seat and revel  
why others wither away from stirring a broth not their  
own.

Igba melo la o lo laye,  
are we not just froth flies?



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# INTERVIEW

## Abisola Gbadamosi

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*This is one in a seven-part interview series featuring selected artists using various media. We try to go under the hood of the artist's craft.*

**To open the seal, we will like to know some things about you; your background, growing up, why and how you became an artist.**

If I am being very honest, I did not know I was going to be a professional artist until 2 to 3 years ago when I had my first exhibition at Brick Lane Gallery London, but I have always been a creative ever since I was young. I used to doodle on all my school books to the point where I had to rewrite all my notes for submission. I used to sculpt a lot. My first medium was Plasticine and I was really good with it. I didn't even start painting until I was 17. My dad was an architect and my mum was a bit of an artist so it ran in the family (laughs). However, when they passed away, art became my vibe. Art was a hobby for me 'cause in the society that we live in you have to go to school to either become a lawyer, doctor and so on. So I did not even think I was going to be an artist. Though I had always thought I was an artist inside.

I studied at Corona Primary school in Lagos,

then I went on to British international school in Lagos as well. Then St Bede School for my A'Levels.

I think I officially became a professional artist when I had the exhibition with Rele Gallery. Although prior to that I had had multiple exhibitions.

**How would you describe your art form?**

I will say my art is "enchantic". Not of this world. I'll describe it as my soul speaking to myself. When I was making art growing up I wasn't really trying to send a message out there. When I was 12, I started a company called Latakada with some friends. It's on a pause though. We are trying to figure out what to do with it. It was a medium for us to release whatever pain we were feeling in our hearts at the time.

I guess when my dad passed, I needed to get rid of the pain as well so I started painting. My first paintings took me hours for some, months. As I was learning about the pain and trying to heal from it, I was painting. Now my art is kind of contemporary and that was because of Rele Gallery.

They helped me focus my art because it was a bit everywhere. I use watercolor and its one of the toughest mediums.

**How do you work and what inspires your work?**

My art is a form of catharsis. So it's a way to help you relate to me in order for you to feel like you are not alone. The pain I experienced growing up helped inspire me starting out. I needed a vibe, something to help me heal and I am just grateful to God for giving me this talent to be able to do that.

**Someone once said, "Good art should disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed". What message/messages do you try to convey to the audience via your art?**

I completely agree with you on that statement. That was why I said my art is a form of catharsis. It's basically a way to allow you release whatever energy you are feeling or comfort you or freak you out depending on the narrative of the story or the work. For example, the second volume from my "I am not my Body" series, it's called "Dystopia". I can't really go into details (laughs). But it's basically about how we live in a state of dystopia. I was going through a rough time while making that series so it was a way for me to tell a story to disturb and comfort you at the same time.

**We are sure you are familiar with a couple of African artist dead or alive. Which of them has been your biggest influence?**

Beyond just the art, I am inspired by artists'

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Being an artist  
that creates,  
my favourite thing is  
that I get to  
actually cry on paper.  
I get to release my  
emotions unto my work.

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personalities. I had the opportunity to speak to Isaac Emokpae during my young contemporary exhibition with Rele gallery. If not for him, I don't think I would have been able to channel my emotions properly and actually be able to do the work that I am doing right now.

There's also Victor Ehikhamenor and Habeeb Andu, who was also part of Young Contemporaries. He is amazing. He always tells me that "If I spend too long with you, I am going to inspire you" and he actually inspired me. He is a very positive person. He always checks up on me. I have never met anybody who is so nice in my life. Also my other young contemporary mates too. They really inspired me to move forward. Yasser gave me a sense of maturity. Samuel, his patience and views on life really taught me a lesson. Dandelion, her go-to attitude about getting what she wants and being confident in herself. Niyi Okeowo inspires me. He is amazing. My brother Lanre Gbadamosi is also a big inspiration. He is a poet and an artist as well.

Everybody has made me who I am today. Maybe I'll say my biggest influence is God. Because if not for life lessons, I won't be able to paint.

## **What will you say is your favourite thing about being an artist?**

Being an artist that creates, my favorite thing is that I get to actually release my emotions on paper. I believe a lot of people don't know how to release/channel their emotions. Exhibitions are quite fun too. You get to meet different people. People are excited to talk to you.

## **Like any other discipline making art definitely has its downsides. What have you observed to be the downsides to being an artist?**

There are so many downsides. Cost of equipment, framing, that's a lot. Having to be patient especially when your art doesn't sell. It hurts. People don't tell you it hurts but it hurts. (laughs)

Another downside will be, for instance, you are having a solo exhibition and you have to create like 10 pieces of art and you have no inspiration, you are screwed and especially someone like me that gets inspiration off life experiences and life lessons. If I don't have any lesson or experience at the moment or I am not spiritually developing myself, I can't produce anything.

Also, people can manipulate you. I don't know if it's just me. I think it's just me (laughs). But people can really manipulate you in terms of maybe reducing the value of your art. Art is such a personal thing for me it's connected to every emotion I feel. So the downside is when someone insults my art or doesn't like my art. I get really upset. I'm still a growing artist and I feel when I am like 28/29 it won't bother me anymore. It's a mindset thing. I am still coming out there, so the opinion of others matters to me. Rather than the opinion of myself. Which is all that should matter to me at the end of the day.

## **When/how do you know a piece of art is finished?**

You never know your piece is done until you frame it and you know you can never go back to it. I always find a way to add something even till now. If I don't frame it, then it's not done. I know when a series is done though. When I learn my lesson from it.

## **In recent times, the spotlight has been on African art especially from the West. What is your opinion on the art scene in your country and Africa art large?**

The art scene in Nigeria is developing. You have the ArtX Fair... there are so many exhibitions. So many young creatives as well. I am still a growing artist so some of my opinions now may change as I grow. But I feel like there's a lot of politics and manipulation. I've heard of cases of exploitation. But like I said I am still a growing artist and I am learning from the Art scene.

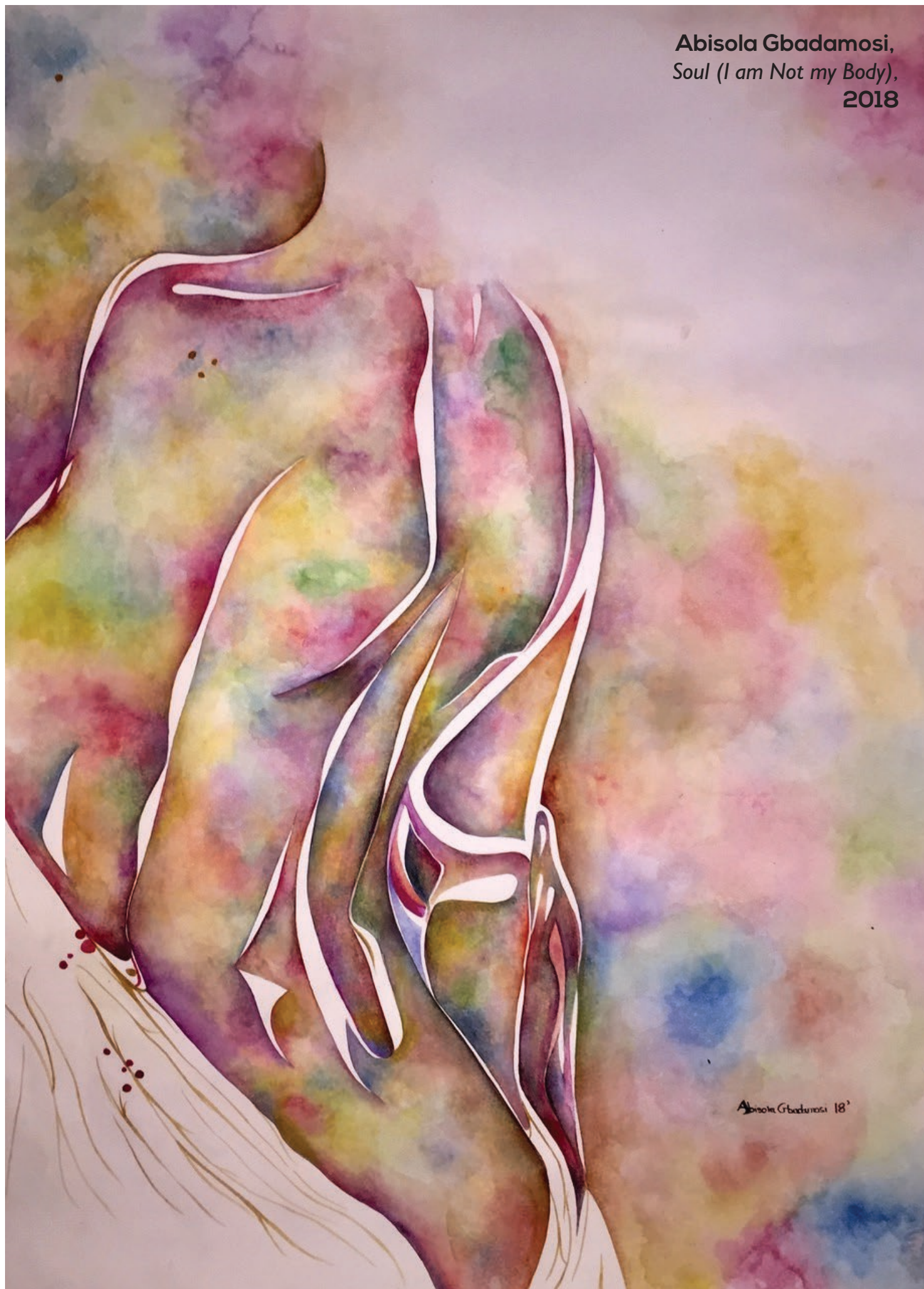
## **We like to see Art as a life form chiefly because it evolves and new trends can spring up from anywhere. What art trends are you following at the moment?**

I'm not really following any trend. I am just going with the flow.

Follow [@akg.akg](#) on Instagram to experience more from Abisola Gbadamosi.

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Abisola Gbadamosi,  
*Soul (I am Not my Body)*,  
2018



Abisola Gbadamosi 18'

**Abisola Gbadamosi,**  
*Spirit (I am Not my Body),*  
2018



My art is a catharsis so it's a way to help you relate to me in order for you to feel like you are not alone. The pain I experienced growing up helped inspire me starting out. I needed a vibe, something to help me heal and I am just grateful to God for giving me this talent to be able to do that.

**Abisola Gbadamosi, 2018.**

# Number 14

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Toni Kan

"I saw Gideon," my sister told me on the phone the moment I said hello.

"Which Gideon?" I asked

"Gideon of Number 14," she said and I felt the room grow small and become a noose around my neck.

I reached for my towel and wrapped it around me, a chill settling upon me suddenly from the air conditioner.

I was in the bathroom when she called and I had rushed out the moment I heard the special ring tone I had set for her.

"Are you there? Are you okay? I wanted to tell you when you had gotten home and was relaxed from work."

My sister was babbling on but I was no longer listening. Her first words were like a hammer knocking hard against my head – IsawGideon IsawGideon IsawGideon IsawGideon IsawGideon IsawGideon IsawGideon.

Gideon was not someone she was supposed to see. Gideon was the past, a memory interred, a corpse we had buried and forgotten.

Gideon of Number 14.

That was how we described him even though his full name was Gideon Efe Ekwe. We knew that because it was written in the tattered old Bible he always carried with him. And my younger sister used to joke that he had the initials of a politician.

"Just imagine his poster: "Vote for Your GEE,"" she always joked.

We lived on Olanrewaju Street in Yaba, right behind Tejuosho market. It wasn't a big place. There were beer parlours and hair salons at its yawning gape and the street then snaked its way to a dead end, of sorts, which if allowed to go on would take you straight onto the rail lines. Our street was, in many ways, like a long rope that did not know how to unravel.

We did not have rich people on Olanrewaju Street. And when I say rich people, I mean Ilupeju rich, Ikeja rich, Yaba GRA rich; bungalows snug in their own grounds or duplexes half-hidden behind tall hedges or coconut trees.

The only family that could be called rich lived at No 9. It was the only bungalow on the street and was occupied by an Igbo man who worked at the Ports. Our parents always said

“Ports” and for a long time I thought he worked in two places.

They owned two cars. He drove a 504 station wagon while his wife drove a 504 saloon car. She was the only woman who drove a car on Olanrewaju Street.

They were the first to buy a color TV and they were also the first to buy a VHS video player. They also owned a Blaupunkt stereo set. Everyone else owned a Sanyo or a Sony or a JVC. A Blaupunkt was the Optimus Prime of stereo sets, the Shina Rambo of sound systems. A Blaupunkt did not come like other sound systems did. It came as a set, on a rack, like a boss.

My mother’s friend, Mama Risi, who lived beside them at number 7 and right opposite us called them “Awon Ole.”

“How much does he earn that he can afford all these? I am sure he is buying them off wharf rats.”

I didn’t know what wharf meant but living on Olanrewaju street, we had a relationship with rats, big furry things that made me scream every time they scurried past or brushed their slimy wetness against me.

“Is it because they are rich? Mama Risi is too jealous,” my younger sister would say whenever Mama Risi got in her mood and my mother would hush her;

“Don’t say that about your elders.”

“Is it because she is an elder? What if it’s true?” my sister would insist.

“Then let others say it,” my mother would answer

“Is she not an elder to the other people?”

“Leave me alone, you aski-aski pikin,” my mother would snap and chase her away.

We called my younger sister ASK-ari because she could drive you stark raving mad with her questions. Every time she opened her mouth, a long string of what, how, who, what, if, imagine if and her favourite “is it because...” would come tumbling out like wrongly bound goods falling off a pick-up truck on the Third Mainland bridge. They always caused havoc.

We called her ASK-ari because growing up we thought askari was a name for people who asked too many questions.

Olanrewaju Street was a peculiar place. Located right behind the old Tejuosho market, it was never quiet. Some of the traders who sold stuff at the market had warehouses on our street and their boys were always rushing in and out of our street to pick up this or that.

I didn’t like them. They stared too hard and long and they were always trying to touch you, to hold your hand or ‘tap current’ by fondling your breast. One day, one of them tapped the wrong current. The girl held on to him and started screaming. Her brothers left their video game and came running out. They beat him like a pick pocket, tore his clothes and dumped him naked and bound in the gutter.

When the other Igbo boys heard, they came down from the market and tried to rescue him but a big fight broke out and many of the boys were bleeding when the police arrived and made a few arrests.

Long after the fight ended and after we had opened our windows because the tear gas had stopped making our eyes sting, I sat there and wondered why the police arrived so fast. I wanted the Igbo boys beaten and their hands broken so they would stop grabbing you as you walked past and trying to touch your breast and get their hands up your skirt.

But they were back the next day with plasters and bandages and carrying bales of clothes on their heads and their backs and looking for girls to ogle and call Baby'm.

In spite of these, for many of the girls on Olanrewaju Street, their biggest dream was to go out with an Igbo boy.

Whenever Mama Risi saw them parading all over to catch the attention of the Igbo boys, she would say to my mother "Ore mi, see them, see them selling their yansh like Agege bread."

"Mama Risi, take it easy," my mother would tell her, her embarrassed gaze scanning our faces to see whether we had heard.

"Igbo boys can spend on you well-well," Yemi, the one who could not tell that 5 x 4 and 4 x 5 gave the same answer, used to tell us.

"Follow Igbo boy and you no go hungry and you know say boys wey fit carry load go fit carry woman," she would say and laugh, her big breasts jiggling.

My sister told me she heard that Yemi had slept with 17 boys on our street and more than 20 Igbo boys. The boys on our street said she would sleep with you if you bought her a bottle of Maltex and that she would do "till day break" if you bought her isi-ewu or nkwobi.

Gideon of number 14, never spoke evil about anyone. Whenever we talked to him about the girls, Gideon would smile and say, "Let him who has no sin cast the first stone."

Mama Risi did not mind casting the first stone. She called Yemi "Ashewo kobo-kobo" and never talked to her or her big sister, Funke; the one who had three children for three different men at twenty one. She did not reply when they said "Ekaaro ma". Instead she would spit and give them the look.

Yemi did not like me and my sisters. She always said "our own was too much" because my sister would not join her to visit boys but she did not mind telling us stories of what she had been up to.

"You see that Igbo boy, im thing big like horse own," she said one evening then went jiggling all over as she strolled home from the new Mr. Biggs eatery that had just opened by the filling station in front of Tejuosho market.

"She thinks her Ashewo stories will entice me," my sister muttered under her breath. "I will not sleep with an Igbo boy just because of Mr. Biggs meat pie."

I looked at her, face squeezed with disgust as if sleeping with an Igbo boy was the worst thing one could possibly do, and said "Stop talking like Mama Risi."

Most of the girls who didn't like us also didn't like Gideon. He was, with his Bible and dusty shoes, like a hot iron to their conscience. My sister and I were his only friends.

My younger sister didn't care much for him and called him Gideon Bible after the small blue bibles Gideon sometimes handed out to neighbours on the street.

"Is it because he's a preacher is that why Gideon Bible won't polish his shoes?" she would ask and click her tongue and at such moments I could not decide who hated her more; me or our big sister.

Gideon had a brother who walked with a limp. His name was Kome and everyone said the limp was from polio. I knew polo but I didn't know polio and for years I thought he fell while playing polo. He walked with a limp and a frown that made it look as if the world owed him an apology but the truth was the world, especially Olanrewaju street, didn't care very much for a boy with a limp and a frown.

Gideon was usually soft spoken. When we chatted, my sister and I would strain to hear him. He liked to talk about current affairs just like Broda Phillip and it was from them that we first heard of Glasnot and Perestroika.

It was as if shyness made Gideon squeak. But when he preached, he was a man transformed. His voice rose a notch and carried across the street especially when he cried "repent ye, now!"

He usually preached on Saturday mornings because he left early for school on week days. Once he stepped out, his voice would rouse the street, inviting curses from men and women who left very early for work and had only Saturdays to sleep in.

"Omo yi, were ni e ni?" someone would scream.

"Go to hell," another would yell.

But their curses only made him bolder and he would scream at the top of his voice, his clenched fist pounding his old bible, his eyes shut tight, the sweat pouring as he walked the length of our street. Just before he was done, my sister and I would go out and wait for him with a cup of cold water.

He would drink it and mutter a quiet thank you as if the effort had drained him of strength. Resting his back against the wall, he would lapse into a prayer of thanksgiving then fall asleep.

One day as he sat there with his eyes shut and back against the wall I turned to my sister and whispered.

"I want to kiss him."

She smacked me so hard, my cry made Gideon snap awake. Later, after he was gone, she looked at me and said, "What's wrong with you. You want to send him to hell. Are you Jezebel?"

I knew I was not a Jezebel. I knew Gideon liked me too but his preaching and that old Bible and the heavenly something-something he always spouted had made him blind.

And I was blind too, too blind to see that my sister was as in love with Gideon as I was.

Sex was cheap on Olanrewaju. It was there in the cramped face-me-I-face-you tenement houses. There in the suffocating room and parlour six children shared with their mum and dad. It was there in the open-air bathrooms. In the street corners and everywhere you cared to turn or look.

It was common to wake up at night and hear neighbours going at it outside the window or to go the toilet and hear two people moaning. We knew what sex was before we fully understood what it meant.

Our street had a smell. It was foul and fruity, like rotting orange left too long in the shade. It was a smell that stuck to everything and became so present we soon stopped noticing it was there.

Many years later, that ever-present stink that stuck to Olanrewaju like a curse came to be for me like our country, a place we all wanted to escape from but did not know how.

And escape was something we all talked about a lot on Olanrewaju. We wanted to check out, not really from Nigeria, but from that street which seemed to hold us hostage, one that stole our dreams and stunted our aspirations.

But escape was mostly a thought, a dream, like Andrew, the guy who used to be on TV years ago, the one who could not check out because he was not really a human being.

"He is just a character in the government's propaganda machine," Broda Phillip used to say.

To get his attention all you needed to do was talk about politics or the government or something you heard on NTA network news and he would stop and chat with you but he did not really chat with you. Talking with Broda Phillip was like listening to a teacher, there was always too much to take in.

Broda Phillip was the neatest guy on Olanrewaju street. He had graduated from Yaba College of Technology with a Distinction and worked for Rank Zerox. That year and in many years to come, everyone who passed their final year exams at secondary school, applied to Yaba College of Technology and their ambition was to graduate with a Distinction even though we did not really understand what a Distinction meant. Yet we all wanted to get it because we all wanted to be like Broda Phillip with his black trousers, starched white shirts and blue ties.

He was the neatest and smartest guy on that street so no one could understand why he stayed on, living at Number 14 with his mother and four sisters.

One day, my sister was reading a novel called “Hell Hath No Fury” when she suddenly called out my name. I rushed out thinking there was something going on. But she thrust her novel at me and said: “read this passage.”

Two months after Amy Haggard was rescued from her kidnapper, she smuggled a gun into the prison where he was being kept in an ill-fated attempt to spring him. He shot two guards before he was cut down in a hail of bullets. He died and she went on trial. The defence lawyers pleaded insanity and a diminished sense of right and wrong. They said having become attached to Ryan Johnson, her abductor, Amy had begun to suffer from a severe case of Stockholm Syndrome; a phenomenon that occurs when some who is held captive develops a bond with her abductor.

“I have read it,” I said not comprehending.

“You can’t see?”

“See what?”

“Stockholm Syndrome. That’s what Broda Phillip is suffering from, that’s why he won’t leave this street even though he can afford to.”

I didn’t really understand what it all meant but I understood enough to join my sister in calling Broda Phillip, Stockholm Syndrome.

Whenever we were around people and we wanted to talk about him, we would say something like:

“Did you see Stockholm Syndrome’s new shoes? Sweet.”

Or:

“This one the whole family is outside looks like Stockholm Syndrome has a visitor.”

No one knew why he stayed on in that house on that street and our consternation grew when he came home one day with a 404 pick-up van with Rank Zerox written boldly on the sides. We thought, finally, he had come to pack.

And our hearts were clenched in the vice grip of envy as he loaded his mother and sisters into the van.

“See, he is going to move everyone out without picking anything from that rotten house,” my sister said.

Broda Phillip turned the car around and the smile on his mother’s face and that of his sisters was bright enough for the blind to see.

We woke up the next morning to find the van parked in front of Number 14. Broda Phillip had no plans to move.

But it wasn't his clean clothes or pick-up van that amazed us the most. It was his girlfriend. Auntie Franca was an Air Hostess with Nigerian Airways. Whenever she visited, the street would grow quiet as if someone had doused it with cold water. She walked as if an invisible hand was moving her buttocks this way and then that way; her green skirt hugging her behind like it was scared to let go even for a second.

Most times when she visited, we would sit outside and watch. His mother and sisters would sit outside till late, swatting at the mosquitoes or walking up and down the street because as my big sister would say, Broda Phillip and Auntie Franca were inside gbenshing.

"Why are you talking like Mama Risi?" I would ask but she would laugh and say:

"Stay there. Why do you think they are always outside when she visits?"

Everyone was always outside at Number 14, though, because the building was crowded and there were too many rooms and very few windows. The house was old and tottered the way a drunken old man totters, as if it was going to lose its moorings and collapse. But it never did and never has because the last time I visited Olanrewaju Street, when Mama Risi died, Number 14 was still standing like a rude finger in our faces and someone had painted a huge "This House Is Not For Sale" sign in front. That was when I heard that Kome was a millionaire in America, that Yemi was a big Madame in Italy and that Broda Phillip had become the Managing Director of a shipping company.

It was as if everything good had come and everyone had found their way out. But Gideon was the only one nobody knew his whereabouts or what had happened to him after that terrible afternoon at Number 14.

Broda Phillip eventually left but in a haze of something bitter sweet.

One evening, Auntie Franca arrived early and by the time Broda Phillip came home, parked his car and ducked into the eternally dark corridor of Number 14, his mother and his sisters had trooped outside.

But they didn't stay out for long because a few minutes before 7pm, Broda Phillip tore out of Number 14 in panic. Auntie Franca had experienced an asthma attack. Unable to revive her, Broda Phillip had run screaming outside, his boxers worn the wrong way. Half of the neighbours had trooped into the room and found Auntie Franca spread-eagled on the bed with all her goods on display.

Too shaken to drive, neighbours helped ferry her to the hospital. Auntie Franca survived but the relationship did not and soon after, Broda Phillip bundled his mother and sister into his pick-up truck and finally escaped Number 14.

Broda Phillip was not the only one to leave in a hurry. One afternoon the Igbo man who worked at the ports chased his eldest daughter out of the house. He was wielding his belt and flogging her as she ran. Then as he raised it again and brought it low, the daughter ducked so that he spun on his heels like a demented ballerina and ended up in the gutter. That was when many people on the street realized that she was naked save for her under garments.

The story came out after many days but only after he had been helped out from the gutter by my father and after the daughter had been covered up by a wrapper my mother rushed out with. . The story was that he came home early that day from a trip and found his daughter having sex with the man they paid to iron their clothes.

They moved out soon after.

We woke up one morning to find the loveliest thing that had ever chanced upon Olanrewaju street at our doorstep. It had two blue eyes, curly black hair and skin that looked and felt like soft brown leather.

"What are you looking for?" I asked, careful not to spill the water I had fetched for Gideon, who was panting and wiping sweat off his brow with a crooked finger.

"Noffin'," the small mouth said. "He was speaking too loud so I came to see."

"To see what?" I asked and the answer was another Noffin'.

Her name was Diana and she was Mama Risi's granddaughter. Her UK based daughter had recently split from her white husband and to avoid the custody battle, she had sent her daughter to come live with Mama Risi.

Diana was beautiful. Beauty, however, was no armour against the iron-toothed mosquitoes that swarmed around Olanrewaju street. One week after her arrival, Diana's skin had become a patchwork of welts and badly scratched skin.

Everyone loved Diana even though she never said good morning.

"Don't say hello, say good morning, they are not your mates," her grandmother would admonish. But Diana was too stuck in her ways and the only concession she made was "Hello, good morning" and that only when her grandmother was around.

"Is it because she is half caste that she is saying noffin'? Is noffin' not bad English? Can you say noffin' at Cambridge?" my sister asked one ugly morning when the wind was blowing the stench of Olanrewaju street directly into our house and leaving every one short tempered.

"ASK-ari shut up, shut up and stop talking like that or you will become like Mama Risi."

"What is wrong with Mama Risi?" ASK-ari asked and our big sister flung her flippers at her.

But it was true. Nothing was wrong with Mama Risi. Diana's coming had made Mama Risi a better person. She was suddenly less judgemental. She still saw Yemi with the jiggling breasts and her girls standing by the street corner and hawking their sex but there were no more stones to throw. Her only focus was Diana and getting her to say Ekaaro and good morning or afternoon instead of hello.

Then we woke up that Saturday morning and everything changed. It was as if someone had dislocated the very joint that held up the scaffold of our communal existence.

It was the third Saturday of the month and so a quiet one because Gideon attended a Night Vigil every third Friday and couldn't preach the next morning.

So, the street was quiet enough for us to hear Mama Risi cry.

"Diana don die o, Diana don die. Egba mi o. Omo mi ti ku o!"

The street was alive by the time we had made ourselves decent enough to come out. Mama Risi looked mad in her old petticoat and bra. Her hair was a wild mess as she ran around the abandoned car on which someone had placed Diana's supine body.

Diana looked different. Her beautiful mosquito bitten skin seemed ashen and darker than usual, as if a giant mosquito had sucked out all the freshness from it.

There was no doctor to certify her dead and no attempt was being made to take her to the hospital. It was just one man or the other walking up to the body, touching the neck or the hand, shaking their heads and then walking away.

I watched the scene and what I saw was a tableau of pain and frustration and despair. It was as if Olanrewaju Street had manifested into a tactile essence and taken control, showing us all how small and inconsequential we were. The street had taken one of us, the most beautiful thing in our midst, and what had we done?

That was when I spoke up. "Let's call Gideon. Gideon can raise her."

Many years later, I am not sure why I spoke those words or how the crowd had managed to hear me in all that frenzy but those words were like an electric current pulsing through the mass. I saw someone pick up the child and as if one body, the crowd moved towards Number 14.

I marched with them, my love and pride propelling me. After Gideon had raised the child, everyone would tell him that "it was her who said to call you." That would be it. No more proof needed. He would finally see how much he was loved.

They roused him from sleep and he stumbled out in his worn pyjamas, bible in hand, face set like flint. A hush fell on the crowd as he began to pray, a soft hissing prayer that soon grew in pitch eliciting "Amen" and "Blood of Jesus" from the crowd and then he began to speak in tongues, his eyes tightly shut, the distended veins threatening to burst on his forehead.

The prayer and tongues grew into a hubbub and the crowd was soon caught in the fever but every fever breaks and soon, the men began to disperse and then the women and soon it was just Gideon, drenched in sweat and covered in a haze of dust, a sad picture of defeat and frustration, circling the dead child, his legs dragging as strength left him.

I watched it all from my perch in front of Number 14. For once, it was empty. The entire street was empty. The neighbours were all inside, chastened by what seemed like sadness and pity for Gideon.

I watched him stop. I watched him wipe off the tears and sweat. I saw him tap Mama Risi on the shoulder and then watched him walk into Number 14. He walked past me with glazed eyes and disappeared into their room at the end of the corridor.

His siblings streamed out minutes after, Kome limping as if he was dancing to some horrible

tune.

I waited a heartbeat then went into the corridor and that was when it hit me that I had never been inside Number 14 before. I had sat outside, many times, with Gideon and my sister and Broda Phillip, even. But I had never stepped into that corridor.

The corridor was dirty and pock-marked with holes. It looked like it had not been swept in years. As I walked further in, I came to the staircase that led upstairs. The banister was dirty and slimy, as if it had accumulated so much dirt that had turned the metal into a living, breathing thing.

I got to the door from which everyone had stepped out and as I raised my hand to knock, I heard someone crying. So, I lowered it and waited. There was a door at the end of the corridor. I walked to it and looked outside and finally realised where that foul and fruity smell came from. There was a low fence and then nothing, just brackish green water over which they had laid blocks, stepping stones, on which I realised that tenants who did not have bathrooms or toilets stood over to bathe or defecate.

The smell was thick and overwhelming.

I listened. The sound of crying seemed to have stopped so I stepped in. Gideon was sitting on a tired old settee. He had peeled his top off and the floor was littered with torn papers. I bent down and picked a handful. The first one said Isaiah Chapter 9. Gideon had ripped out the pages of his bible.

"Gideon," I cried and reached out to touch him but he recoiled from me.

"Go. Leave me. Get out"

Stung, I stumbled back then fell.

That was when Gideon got to his feet and fell on top of me, his hands tearing at my clothes, his lips covering mine, muffling my cries.



Jekein Lato-Unah,  
*She's Seen It All*, 2018

# Cigarette Butt

Nduka Akpe

I

Your fingers traipsing  
across my face taste like cigarettes  
Smells I use to hate taste so lovely when they tickle my  
nostrils winking slyly as they curl  
about the stray strand of hair  
I call moustache at the corner of my lip –  
Just here

You blow and this room that inhabits you and I  
that we pretend to inhabit begins to fill with  
foul things that fly, that glide without beauty  
little cumulus of pale clouds that jiggle  
Wisps possessed by a slowness that scatters  
into tatters as my palm beats the air  
for breath for my face

This will not happen again,  
you said that last time  
I concurred  
Your left nipple did not...

...and I with no pretence to a conscience  
or illness  
took your almost pink erectness  
as pill

And I stroked  
and stroked  
and tweaked you as with a pick...

and you fell  
you fell vibrating still,

thrashing  
about my finger...

...again.

II

In afterglow  
you light up another  
The tip of my nostrils  
to breath places its head on my window-net,  
eyes watering

That smell  
That smell

You call me a synonym for butt  
and laugh something hoarse and lonely wrapped in a foil  
of whispers ‘  
as the generators begin their chorus

The cigarette suffers its throes  
in screams that gleam embers

Like that cigarette  
I cannot refuse my butt  
between your lips: damp,  
damn,...

...damp, I melt, I forget  
and then burn,  
again.



Niyi Okeowo, *H*, 2018

# INTERVIEW

## Niyi Okeowo

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*This is one in a seven-part interview series featuring selected artists using various media. We try to go under the hood of the artist's craft.*

**To open the seal, we will like to know some things about you; your background, growing up, why and how you became an artist.**

Pretty straightforward childhood, loving parents, supportive family and a lot of curiosity that probably cost me most times. I've always been drawn more to images than words or numbers, was never really the best at communicating and found drawing at the back of my school notebooks as a way of expressing myself. University only made that possibility bigger with better access to the Internet. I guess it was bound to happen.

**How would you describe your art form?**

Minimal, emotional and sometimes, colourful.

**How do you work and what inspires your work?**

For photography it's pretty straightforward

depends on the mood or story I want to tell, I am a big fan of portrait and documentary photography and I find I am always happy and excited when I get to travel somewhere and document new places also when I am shooting live music or shadowing personalities.

For design, it's usually based on the brief or what the client wants. If it's a personal project, it's also about the message I want to send out there.

For my experimental and colourful projects, I just let my mind wander far and see where it takes me.

**Someone once said, "Good art should disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed". What message/messages do you try to convey to the audience via your art?**

I am a big supporter of mental health.... Basically from anxiety to depression to suicide prevention. I am always looking for new ways to tie mental health into the narrative of my art. I talk about battling with suicide and depression a lot... it's only right I tell it via my work.

**We are sure you are familiar with a couple of African artist dead or alive. Which of them has been your biggest influence?**

Photography: August Udoh, Obi Somto, Ty Bello, Jimi Agboola, Manny Jefferson, Yagazie Emezi, TSE

Graphic Design / Visual Art : DaDesign Studio, Osaze Amadasun, Karo Akpokiere and Bobby Trauma

**What will you say is your favourite thing about being an artist?**

The ability to tell stories and retell certain narratives from my own perspective.

**Like any other discipline making art definitely has its downsides. What have you observed to be the downsides to being an artist?**

Being too personal with feedback, not taking the business side serious, thinking talent is enough, people not wanting to pay for your time, people taking advantage of your love for your passion, too much empathy.

**When/how do you know a piece of art is finished?**

When it gives me peace... to be fair you never really know... but you get a certain sense of peace once you have genuinely finished. It's like, no more "should I change this?"

**In recent times, the spotlight has been on African art especially from the West. What is your opinion on the art scene in your country and Africa art large?**

I love it, I love that artists from Africa now

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I love that  
artists from Africa  
now have the  
spotlight and can  
genuinely tell the  
stories they want.

---

have the spotlight and can genuinely tell the stories they want, there's always this talk of "everyone is a photographer/artist / creative" these days... I honestly don't see what's wrong with people trying to be artists and creatives. There is a lot of room for everyone to express themselves and get their ideas out there.

**We like to see Art as a life form chiefly because it evolves and new trends can spring up from anywhere. What art trends are you following at the moment?**

I don't know if it's a trend... but trying my hands on sculpting and life casting, its a medium I'd love to explore in the nearest future.

Follow [@niyiokeowostudio](#) on Instagram to experience more from Niyi Okeowo.

Follow [@agbowoart](#) on Instagram to discover more exciting art from various artists.



I honestly don't see what's wrong with people trying to be artists and creatives. There is a lot of room for everyone to express themselves and get their ideas out there.

Niyi Okeowo, 2018

# What We Do Not Want

Romeo Oriogun

*After Jennifer Perrine*

We do not want the hate, no ghost boys wandering about cities that should be home, no sticks calling the name of love, no mother giving up on boys so soft the earth knows them as breath, no breaking of effeminate boys into houses filled with the pain of being strong, no song calling on the sky for fire, no fire speaking the language of burning skin, no empty rooms in the stomach of boys filled with love

&

we do not want you turning your back as queer boys are filled with straws, as they are made dry, as they are prepared to be sacrificed to a God whose body is filled with smoke, as they know fire as a ritual of death, as they know love as the precursor of burnt bones, as they run into the dark to survive, as they navigate between shadows to know love, as they grow used to their fingers searching for honey in a house without light, as they yearn for love, as they wander deep into questions that leave the body sore

&

we do not want the tears, no mother dragging us to church, no altar filled with the smell of burning incense, no prophet clad in a white gown, no Bible raised high like a sword, no whip coming down hard on bare backs, no boy holding his lover's name in a song of pain, no words of deliverance hanging over beautiful heads, no mother fighting back tears, no boy bathing with water filled with prayers and leaves, no boy walking back home with shame, no boy washing his tongue to be safe, no boy burning his skin to know the taste of death

&

we do not want pity, no eyes boring holes in our bodies, no eyes raising us into museum pieces, no boy mocking our bodies, no officers arresting boys for love, no one asking how a kiss feels like, no one hitting batons on soft joints, no one giving us freedom because of bribes, no one opening our bodies into memories of storms, no one driving us out of our bones, no one scaring us with fourteen years of gaol, no fear, nothing.



K. Purim  
2018

# We Do Not Throw Away Yesterday's Àmàlà

## *Ladipo Titiloye*

In the year 1996, my grandmother hired a new maid called Fatima. On her first morning with us, she checked the cooler for leftovers and found a big wrap of àmàlà from the day before. She took it out of the cooler and nearly threw it in the dustbin.

"Don't do that," grandmother said, "in this house, we do not throw away yesterday's àmàlà."

"What do you do with it?" she asked.

Grandmother took it from her, and went into the kitchen to start the family tradition of rejuvenating yesterday's àmàlà into 'akala gbona', the sweetest food on earth.

She told Fatima to put a terracotta pot on fire while washing the àmàlà in a bowl of warm water. She added little water to the pot, cut the àmàlà into cubes and put it in the pot. A minute passed for the àmàlà to get steamy hot before she added few drops of palm oil.

At that moment, a special aroma filled the kitchen and escaped its way to the nearby windows. Some curious noses in the house dragged their owners to the kitchen hoping to have a taste but it was seldom enough for two, not to talk of our extended family of more than twenty people.

I stood by her side, ready to assist that I may qualify for a taste. I brought water for her to clean the ladle and did the honours of adding ewedu, the final ingredient, into the steamy oiled cubes of àmàlà. She turned it together carefully in the terracotta pot, blew out the hotness of the ladle and tapped it on Fatima's hand. She loved it.

Grandmother and I ate from the pot until we hit the bottom. She used a strong stainless spoon to scrape epa, the burnt àmàlà that stuck to the bottom of the terracotta pot.

"You cannot claim to have finished eating akala," she said, until you eat the epa. It is the sweetest part of the meal."

While my grandmother allowed me to watch, she was not interested in teaching me how to make it. That was my mother's department. Iya tisa fun ra e. She would call out my name or any 'unlucky' boy around and teach us how to cook.

"Won m'oko se," she once said to me, alluding to the fact that women cook with their hands, and not the penis. In the history of the household, my generation of male children were the first to learn how to cook. It didn't matter if the food had little salt or too much of it. Everyone ate it like that.

It was embarrassing in the beginning and there was an intention to rebel but no one dared stand against her. She was the measuring rule for training of children in the house and even on our street. When grandmother tried to raise a voice of support for us, it met a brick wall. She insisted that all the children in the house must learn how to cook, and this included the male children.

Many years later, during my service year in the serene town of Osogbo, that maternal lesson came handy. I was a single guy with hope that a girl I fell in love with in Ilorin will say yes to me. Thank God she never did or I might have never shown interest in the Ekiti girl who did.

She came to my place on CDS days to eat fried sweet potato and eggs and I returned the visit on weekends to eat àmàlà with ewedu and fish. On one of my visits, she wanted to throw away a wrap of àmàlà she made a day before.

“Don’t do that,” I said, “we do not throw away yesterday’s àmàlà.” Just like my grandma said some years back. She watched me turn the àmàlà into akala with disgust and worry. She questioned the edibility of what I was cooking, but unknown to her; I was an alchemist mixing a love potion that no magic could unravel. All she need do was taste it.

It worked and I know this because she is now my wife. I do not know if it played a role in her decision to marry one of the most unromantic guys on earth but I like to think it did. Nowadays, she makes extra àmàlà and keeps it for the ‘akala gbona’ runs the next day.

Akala gbona is popular among the Igbominas in Kwara and Osun states. It may never replace chocolate or yoghurt as food of love but I will teach my children to use it to dazzle their future spouses.

I hope it works.



**Segun Okewumi.**  
*Maternal Love.* 2018.

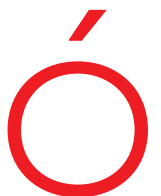


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# INTERVIEW

## Opeyemi Matthew

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*This is one in a seven-part interview series featuring selected artists using various media. We try to go under the hood of the artist's craft.*

**To open the seal, we will like to know some things about you; your background, growing up, why and how you became an artist.**

My name is Olukotun Opeyemi Matthew. I'm a graduate of Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso, Oyo State, Nigeria, 2012, with a B.tech in Fine and Applied Art. My area of specialization is painting. How I became an artist is still surprising because initially I never imagined I would be practicing. Firstly, I was a science student. I always wanted to be a computer engineer, but I got admitted into the university to study "pure and applied chemistry"! (Laughs) Chemistry was the last course I could imagine myself studying, I just didn't like the course. But luckily for me, there is a general course (fine art) for all 100 level students. I fell in love with the 2-unit course and decided to cross to the department in 200 level. After my NYSC in 2014, there was this huge fear in me about starting art as a career. The fear was so overwhelming. I eventually had to take a teaching job which I did for two years. I resigned in December 2016 to face the challenge staring

me in the face. Presently, I'm doing an internship at the Universal Studios of Art, national theatre, Iganmu. I'm practicing art full time now and It feels so good to do what makes you happy!

**How would you describe your art form?**

My style is expressive. I try to render my subjects colourfully. Most importantly, it is understandable.

**How do you work and what inspires your work?**

I work like everyone else. I get inspired by seeing inspiring art, researching, observing and most importantly, appreciation. When someone appreciates what I am doing, it motivates me a lot. It means that my work is important and I am contributing something meaningful.

**Someone once said, "Good art should disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed". What message/messages do you try to convey to the audience via your art?**

The main message my work usually have is to see

"the value in humans".

**We are sure you are familiar with a couple of African artist dead or alive. Which of them has been your biggest influence?**

I have been influenced positively by these prominent Nigerian artists; Mr. Abiodun Olaku, Mr. Ejoh Wallace, Mr. Edosa Oguigo and Mr. Joshua Nmesirionye.

**What will you say is your favourite thing about being an artist?**

Being able to move people intellectually or emotionally through something I made.

**Like any other discipline making art definitely has its downsides. What have you observed to be the downsides of being an artist?**

I will only talk about one- Inconsistent income. Realistically, only the most successful artists are able to support themselves through the sale of their work alone. Many secure a part-time job or turn to teaching art full time for a steadier income.

Moreso, inconsistent income could also lead to taking uninformed advice to heart. "When are you going to get a real job?", "When are you going to grow up?", "You are not growing any younger ", "You can take this thing as a hobby". I feel these are the major downsides.

**When/how do you know a piece of art is finished?**

When the art piece has met my intentions. I ask myself, "does it feel right?" If yes, then I can consider the piece finished .

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Realistically, only the most successful artists are able to support themselves through the sale of their work alone.

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**In recent times, the spotlight has been on African art especially from the West. What is your opinion on the art scene in your country and Africa art large?**

The contemporary art scene in Nigeria has been experiencing significant growth in patronage, promotions, research, and publications. Prof. Ben Enwonwu work titled "Tutu" was auctioned for 1million pound. Awareness is coming into play. African Art is beginning to have a good voice. Hopefully, there will be some financial allocations to this area of discipline soonest.

**We like to see Art as a life form chiefly because it evolves and new trends can spring up from anywhere. What art trends are you following at the moment?**

I'm a representational artist.

Follow [@opeyemiolutokun](#) on Instagram to experience more from Opeyemi Matthew.

Follow [@agbowoart](#) on Instagram to discover more exciting art from various artists.

Opeyemi Matthew.

"Iya oloja"

Acrylic on canvas

24 x 30 inches

2018



Opeyemi Matthew.  
"Mai lemu"  
Acrylic on canvas  
30 x 36 inches  
2018.



# Lakes and Confessionals

Anyah Richard

i kneel before the confessional. the priests' voice  
is driftwood on a lake of abuses; it reminds me of beatings.  
how can god speak through a mouthpiece so harsh?  
the gun on my nightstand is a transport to places  
where fate is a river between two tales. each tale is blue  
from god skidding off its surface in ill disguised glee.  
the priest asked if i chose to kill myself with a colt?  
the lord chose to ride on a mule, not a horse drawn carriage;  
wooden things are an invitation to go berserk.  
the devil is in the loch ness, i answer. the lakes of  
february's soul. hell is a cold and dark place where the devil  
always keeps a monday. i never give thanks for mondays.  
he asks again why i confess a sin not yet committed.  
i tell him because my pride keeps me from mistakes.  
i tell him on the morrow i must own my life.



Jekein Lato-Unah  
Ndali, 2018.

# Are Our Writers No Longer of this Earth?

**Akin Oseni**

*A poet's work is to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world, and stop it (from) going to sleep.*

*Salman Rushdie*

May we, for a moment, discard the epigraph above and reflect on the poser: who is a writer and what are their obligations to the society other than the creation of fictions? As we ruminate on this, may I warn against such cliché of a writer being the conscience of the society without a veritable justification? No doubt, the position of a writer, as the conscience of the society, is a fact well too known, not only in this part of the world but in the entire literary universe.

In his 1980s essay titled *Literary Criticism in the Nigerian Context*, Abiola Irele argued that the only justification of literary criticism, as a profession in a developing country like Nigeria, is in its ability to relate literature to social significance.

What exactly is the focused point here? The point is simply that if a critic, a secondary voice on literary products, is tasked to establish the nexus between literature and the society in his critical endeavours, then it becomes even more obligatory for a writer to be society-sensitive at all times. After all, a writer writes for the critic to reflect and interpret.

Perhaps if we are to use the models put forth by Salman Rushdie in the epigraph above, we may have to journey back to the early days of literature in Nigeria, before we can think of individuals worthy of being regarded altogether as writers; I mean writers in the literary space. No attempt is made here to downplay the panache of creativity in the current crop of Nigerian writers. No. After all, Achebe had before death delivered to us a replica of self in an Adichie that he said *had come almost fully made*.

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**It seems to me our contemporary writers are unaware that their social obligations are beyond the fictional creations of realities.**

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Obviously, Adichie's narrative finesse has held readers to awe since she launched her career into the fictional world; and the writer has not in any way whittled in style. There are the thriving Chika Unigwe, Sefi Atta, Lola Soneyin, Helon Habila, whose narrative impulses are no less piercing as those of the masters. We also have the flourishing Soji Cole and other fledgling playwrights, soaring in the drama genre. Our emergent poets are not floundering in creativity either.

However, it will be critically profane to put this new generation of writers on the eminent row with those of the earlier days. Why? The reason is not in the 1986 Nobel laureateship of Wole Soyinka, nor the Booker Laurel of Chinua Achebe. No. The difference is simply in the devotion of one generation to the society beyond the production of fictions, and remoteness of the other from it.

Whether any one agrees or not, the nexus between literature and society which, as we have often read, was the hallmark of literary engagements in this country in the 60s, 70s, till the late 90s, has now been broken by the remoteness of our contemporary writers from the immediate social and political concerns in our society. In the past, the relationship between the writers and the society was beyond the I-write-and-you-read literary tradition being practised by today's writers.

For instance, according to a critical review, Achebe's novel, *A Man of the People*, conveyed a more vivid sense of the situation in the country in the turbulent years of the first republic than all the political and sociological studies of that period put together. Yet, Achebe did not go to sleep because of this single fictional achievement. He was not deterred from furthering his social responsibilities to the nation through his non-fictional writings. His social remarks and critical reflection on the immediate matters in Nigeria produced a collection of essays, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, and one political commentary, *The Image of Africa and the Trouble with Nigeria* in the 1970s alone.

Less cannot be said of Wole Soyinka, the maverick and literary enigma whose blend of literary and social activism is resonantly echoed in the memoir, *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years*. Soyinka's involvements in the nation and the people's politics, especially in the gory years of the Biafran Civil War are not hidden to all. Frank Aig-Imokhuede was another of the lot. Known for his delight-and-teach satirical penmanship, Imokhuede's social criticism thrived in the worst days of the military, when his satirical column in the Vanguard newspaper was always a pain in the arse of the green gods.

Same was (and still is) the case with the Marxist duo of Biodun Jeyifo and Niyi Osundare, both still actively involved in the big social issues of the country, in spite of their respective distances away from home, as well as their academic and literary occupations. But this is not the case with the contemporary generation of writers in Nigeria. And one only wonders why these writers are so detached from the society they profess to project in their fictions.

Recently, some social media pseudo-activists went all out to descend heavily on Wole Soyinka. Without any reason other than that the old man had not mooted on the goings-on in the country, the critics took Soyinka to the gallows of social persecution. And this was the same Soyinka whose social political involvements had started at Government College, Apataganga, as a high school student. It was the same Wole Soyinka who would endure many months of solitary confinement for challenging the Nigerian military government to cease fire with the Biafran secessionists. This is not so with our contemporary writers.

It seems to me our contemporary writers are unaware that their social obligations are beyond the fictional creations of realities. They appear obviously oblivious of the unsworn oath of a writer as the pointer of frauds, starter of arguments and “waker” of the society from socio-political limbo. They seem to have forgotten the fulfilment of a writer’s social cause is not and cannot be wholly achieved in fictions, because fiction is sometimes too remote a cure for social matters at times needing urgent responses. A writer must get involved in the real public debates, while making his voice heard in the interest of the people.

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**Sometimes, when writers respond to social matters, follies are quickly called to cuffs. We do not have to wait for fictional publications, before we discuss the matters that matter.**

**One only questions the social sensibility of our contemporary writers that every social reality seems to pass them by.**

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Perhaps, among the many writers of our time, Adichie has been the relatively regular voice on the relevant issues relating to the country; but her social contribution has never transcended the justification of man-woman equality, until her recent mixed fortunes of library clapback and postcolonial gaffe during the Paris Night of Ideas. Our writers must fully get involved in the serious matters of social concerns.

There is the queerness in the administrative indifference of the Nigerian government to the gory adventures of the Fulani herdsmen in most part of the country. Innocent Nigerians are butchered by the day without check. We have heard of the ingenious innovation of happiness and fulfilment Ministry by a governor, to the mockery of the discontented members of the state. Today, we are being fed with a larger-than-Beckett’s absurdist spectacles of cash-hungry python land.

These are the major issues which should have taken the front burner in the daily reflections of conscientious writers. Sometimes, when writers respond to social matters, follies are quickly called to cuffs. We do not have to wait for fictional publications, before we discuss the matters that matter. One only questions the social sensibility of our contemporary writers that every social reality seems to pass them by. Or to use the poser of Osundare, are our writers no longer part of this earth?

There was no internet facility that connected Chinua Achebe to the world in the 1960s and 70s;

yet he did not fail in his periodic projection of the gory story of the Biafran people to the world. He wrote to the public and engaged in social debates to achieve his writer's obligation to the society. He did not end it on fictional pages; he knew such would be too parasitic of him as a writer. Now the world has even been turned into a global hamlet, where no civilised creature can pretend to be incognizant of the happenings in the remotest part of the world. But to our utter dismay, our West-bound writers have been the farthest from their society, the same society whose reading patronage they enjoy away from home.

Before I bring this essay to conclusion, permit me to invoke the South African poet, Dennis Brutus, to help remind our contemporary writers that escape to *parasitic relationship* disgusts. There is no basis for *diasporic* heroism, under the pretext of the Afropolitanist movement. It is not enough that they mouth their social sensibilities abroad without meaning them at home. They have to be truly committed to the society from which they enjoy readership patronage.

I am not asking writers to play the daredevil Soyinka by going to a broadcasting house to snatch the broadcaster's speech; and I am not asking them to jostle from country to country like Achebe to advance a Biafran cause. So what is the sermon being preached here? It is simply that our contemporary writers should be truly sensitive and socially committed – not only in fiction, but also in reality. The Soyinkas have served for long. They need to be relieved.



Opeyemi Matthew. "Iya oloja", Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 30 inches, 2018

My style is expressive. I try to render my subjects colourfully. Most importantly, it is understandable. ... The main message my work usually have is to see "the value in humans."

**Opeyemi Matthew, 2018.**

# INTERVIEW

## Segun Okewumi

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*This is one in a seven-part interview series featuring selected artists using various media. We try to go under the hood of the artist's craft.*

**To open the seal, we will like to know some things about you; your background, growing up, why and how you became an artist.**

I am Okewumi Segun Adeniyi, a young visual artist whose specialty is sculpture. I was born on the 28th of May and hail from Oyo State, Southwest, Nigeria. I had my early education in the ancient city of Ibadan before proceeding to Yaba College of Technology where I obtained my National Diploma in Art. I am currently a student of Obafemi Awolowo University in pursuit of a Bachelor's degree in Art. I received formal training at the Visual Art Center in Ibadan where I fully discovered my creative abilities.

**How would you describe your art form?**

I frequently express my artistic philosophy in recycled media. I was attracted to sculpture because of its three-dimensional view and the level of concentration that sculpture requires.

**How do you work and what inspires your work?**

I have tremendous admiration for my mother. She has given me a lot of support in my career. This amazing woman has been a great source of inspiration to me that has opened in me a fountain of creative impulse on several occasions.

**Someone once said, "Good art should disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed". What message/messages do you try to convey to the audience via your art?**

My works radiate empathy for the underprivileged in society. I have a special reverence for motherhood and like to celebrate mothers generally in my works. I would like to be noted for my uniqueness, freshness, and contribution to social reform.

**We are sure you are familiar with a couple of African artist dead or alive. Which of them has been your biggest influence?**

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I would like  
to be noted  
for my uniqueness,  
freshness, and  
contribution to  
social reform.

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I'm so glad to have been influenced by Adeola Balogun, Richard McDonald, Basil Watson, Edosa Ogiugo and Javier Marine.

**What will you say is your favourite thing about being an artist?**

My favourite thing about being an artist is freedom of expression. I also derive joy from what I create from discarded material and the joy their final form gives to art patrons.

**Like any other discipline making art definitely has its downsides. What have you observed to be the downsides of being an artist?**

The downsides to being an artist, once you attain a higher rank, far more work is expected to keep the momentum going. I would say balancing my education with my art practice and not having my own personal art studio are my challenges but there no road without its bumps. Determination and focus always keep me going in my field of art.

**When/how do you know a piece of art is finished?**

I believe an art piece is finished once it has left the artist's studio for the final consumer.

Follow [@segun\\_okewumi](#) on Instagram to experience more from Segun Okewumi.

Follow [@agbowoart](#) on Instagram to discover more exciting art from various artists.



**Segun Okewumi.**  
*Help the Needy.* 2018.

# Petitioning Christ

Abeiku Arhin Tsiwah

Dear  
Christ,  
Whenever I mention your name  
(In short brackets)  
The vowels in my minuscule mouth  
Become a sea with broken eyelashes  
From the makeup of my future wife

But  
Christ,  
Why is her face Europe?  
And her legs Africa

Dear  
Christ,  
(And Satan interjected)  
You poet of little faith  
(Thunderous exclamation  
Two long dashes  
One full stop)

And Christ retorted  
(In bold inverted commas)  
Ephesians 4:16 KJV

And my face  
Became planet 3  
Forged into 7  
Motionless plates.

**Segun Okewumi.**  
*Leaders Are Readers,*  
2018.



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AND SHARING NEW AFRICAN ART

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