GERALD CHUKWUMA TOGETHER TOGETHER

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FOREWORD

It is with great excitement that we present this volume on the remarkable Nigerian artist, Gerald Chukwuma. Gerald Chukwuma's artistic practice reflects the extraordinary cultural production coming out of Nigeria's vibrant art ecosystem for some decades and Lagos's incredibly dynamic and multicultural atmosphere.

Chukwuma's use of traditional Uli and Nsibidi symbols, while acknowledging the connection between his work and the renowned Nsukka art tradition, signifies a profoundly personal and spiritual connection to his history and the present. Chukwuma's works are characterized by highly texturised and meticulously crafted wood panels incorporating techniques such as burning, chiselling, and painting. Chukwuma assembles these panels into weathered and storied artifacts, interwoven with personal and political significance. His art invites viewers to engage with his Igbo heritage and the obscured narratives while offering healing and celebration. He keenly advocates for the environment and is deeply involved with lifting his community.

This book serves as a comprehensive exploration of Gerald Chukwuma's artistic journey. On behalf of the whole Almas team, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Gerald for accepting our invitation and support throughout the production of this volume. We would like to extend our deepest appreciation to our contributing writers Chibundu Onuzo and Professor Chuu Krydz Ikwuemesi. Professor Ikwuemesi contributed an in-depth survey of Chukwuma's artistic trajectory, providing essential context for Chukwuma's practice with respect to the traditional Uli art and the Nsukka school. The wonderful novelist Chibundu Onuzo graciously accepted our invitation and has written an exceptionally perceptive piece capturing not just the essence of Gerald's works but also his exuberant personality and unwavering spirit, which he pours into his work. Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery generously offered their image archives and provided invaluable support throughout. As with our previous publication, this book is accompanied by a short documentary film featuring Gerald Chukwuma, which I invite the readers to watch on our website.

Nothing prepares one for the sense of joy and the range of emotions Chukwuma's works initiate. I invite you to immerse yourself in the following pages and hope you enjoy this volume.

Farah Jirdeh Fonkenell
Founder and CEO, Almas Art Foundation

But if We Walk in the Light, 2021, mixed media, 226 x 226 cm

CONVERSATION WITH GERALD CHUKWUMA

Can you please introduce yourself?

My name is Gerald Ifeanyi Chukwuma. I am a visual artist. I like to call myself a fine and functional artist because anything less than that may not be true. But I studied painting, and then I graduated to other forms of art, which I have now incorporated into everything I do. But you can call me, and I like to be called an artist.

Where are you from?

I am from the eastern part of Nigeria, Imo State to be precise, Oguta local government. It's an island- a very small and beautiful town with water all around it. One of the largest lakes in Nigeria is there. So, it's a beautiful place.

Can you describe your childhood a bit?

My childhood was a bit dramatic. You couldn't put art in it because we didn't really know anything about art. Art was not anything to be talked about as a family. It was much like every other kind of family, but we had to work much more than we work now. I was used to hawking because I had to bring something for the family. It was doing what you're supposed to do as a member of the family. And so, as a child, after school, you have to go sell a few things to bring back something for the family. And I did a lot of farming, too, as a child. During the weekends, we used to farm vegetables because they could grow quickly and then we could go sell them. But I went to primary school, secondary school, the usual thing. We had a lot of activities in between, had a lot of farming, a lot of hawking and a lot of looking after younger ones because our parents were also up and about, and we had to become adults quickly.

Can you tell us a bit more about your parents?

My father was a civil servant before he died in my first year of university. My mother has always been a petty trader; that's what we grew up with. They didn't know anything about creativity. That's my childhood life; that's who my parents were. They said, "You have to be a lawyer, you have to be a business somebody," because trading had to metamorphose into business. So, for my family, creativity was time wasted. We used to put water in small cellophane bags and then freeze and sell it to the people as cold, pure water. So, even though I had art in my childhood, I didn't know how to express it. Sometimes expressing it gave me pain because when I tried to sketch, I got a few lashes. And not that I regret that; it's part of training. My parents were very loving, wanted the best for us, tried to put us in good schools and helped us to become productive. But they obviously didn't understand things about art, creativity, or entertainment. And so, it deviated me a bit as a young boy; I didn't do art at all in the primary or secondary school levels. I couldn't practice. So, I used to hide and draw at night when everybody was asleep. I'd put a little lantern on and try to sketch and

Gerald Chukwuma in his Lagos studio, June 2023

copy pictures from the newspapers I found on my way to hawk. And then I'd copy these things down, draw figures. That's really how I started to think about art. After selling in the day, doing those sketches at night was when I relaxed; they gave me a sort of therapy and eased off all the things I saw through the day. I saw it as something that helped me in one way. I didn't understand what it was, but it made me happy at that time. So, I continued. My parents didn't even realize this until very late in my life.

Can you introduce yourself as an artist?

I like to be called an artist. A fine and functional artist. If you wanted to add anything other than that, sometimes it's untrue. I believe there are two kinds of artists. I believe there's a good artist and a true artist, and these two kinds of artists are very important in the arts, and none is better. But I like to call myself a true artist. I'm trying to categorize it because as a true artist, you can't help. You can't help yourself. You think art, you eat art, you wear art, you sleep art. In fact, if you are going to buy a car, you think of art before you think of mechanics. It comes from within. I don't know if it is proper to label a true artist as an artist because whatever materials you find, wherever you find yourself, you begin to express yourself. And so, I like to be called an artist because even when I'm not doing the technical part of art, I'm thinking about art. If I want to make my bed, I try to make it in such a way that it will have some art in it. I like to be called an artist, but for definitive purposes, I'll say fine and functional artist because I like to move from here to there.

Do you remember who or what inspired you to become an artist? Why are you an artist?

I'd say I found out I was an artist. I found out I loved to do these things, spend time drawing, put things together, to dress differently and I started to understand that this was a creative thing. The first ones that inspired me were the guys I met on the streets when I went hawking. I can never forget those days. On my way to hawk, I met some beautiful people, the guys that made signboards, what we now call billboards. They used to carve them with their hands and print them with rubber stamps. I was amazed that somebody could carve something in the negative. And then, when they started to become positive, I said, "goodness me." I went there and these were my first teachers who inspired me because now I was relating to something that I felt was inside of me. So, every time I went to do my hawking business, I moved quickly to sell out so that I could watch them. They are still on the streets everywhere in Nigeria, cutting banners, making stamps, and doing signposts. These were my first teachers, the first people who patted me on the back and said, look. Sometimes I offered to help them and of course, who doesn't want free help? They didn't mind as long as they were not paying me. So, I learned two things. I learned how to sell my wares quickly so that I could come and watch them. And that when I went home, the most important thing was that you finished what you went to sell.

Going into school, when I got into the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, I found that there were people who could inspire me. I remember Professor Chike Aniakor, who would come to the studio every day, at any time, at midnight if you called him. He is the man who told us, “Listen, you can use any two colours and they will work.” When you are being taught that you mix this colour and this colour they blend more and the guy said, “No, no, no, every colour.” So, it is that drive. I met great teachers, Professor Kyrdz Ikwuemesi, Dr. Chijioke Onuora, and Professor El Anatsui, Professor Ola Oloidi among many others. One day, one of my lecturers sent me to Lagos, and I walked into a gallery, that changed my life forever. Even though I didn’t know the names of the artists, my mind grew larger. The people who inspired me to become a professional artist were those I met after discovering that something in me could be art. And I’m still being inspired today. Every day I get inspired, you know because creativity cannot end.

Did your friends and family support you as an artist? What is their perception of your career as an artist today?

I’ll tell you one story. My mom called me one day when I was at the university. My father had died in the first year and she became a bit bothered. One day she called me and said, “Do you think this art could give you food?” Now, she didn’t mean any harm. My father had gone. I was the first boy. It was on my shoulders to take care of the rest of my siblings. And so, she was doing the normal thing every good mother should do. But I remember that question because she was implying that if art is not good enough, she will be willing to support me to try another thing.

Were they really supportive? Not really, because they didn’t understand that creativity is not just something to put food on your table. It cleanses your soul, makes you glad, and gives you joy. It transfers joy to other people. And I mean, they couldn’t have been as deep as that. We are even beginning to learn that now. So, they weren’t very supportive. No, they thought, “You have been selling this on the streets; why don’t you just become a trader? You’re good at this.” They didn’t understand that I became so good as a trader because I wanted to finish selling my wares quickly and go and look at art, you know, people doing art. They don’t understand that if it wasn’t for the motivation from that art, I could have lingered the whole day and not sold anything. They didn’t really support it, not because they don’t like art, but because they think, in quote, it is for lazy people and is a pastime. So yeah, you can see, be a lawyer and paint, or be a lawyer and sculpt, and it doesn’t matter. Be a lawyer and act. That’s okay. But right there in my spirit, I knew it was much more than that. I couldn’t rest if I didn’t do art a day. So, I knew it was much more than that. And that was the drive I had. This deviated me a lot. It took me ten years to go from secondary school to the university because I didn’t know. Because everybody thought my direction was wrong and I believed them. It took me ten years to realize that I could be right. And I went back to pursue my passion. And am I glad? I am so glad.

And what is their perception of your career today? Do they still think art is for lazy people?

My mother, I go back to her, is happier that I'm an artist than at any other time. And I'll tell you the simple reason. I have the time to visit as much as I like. Now, that's something we didn't realize was important. I have other siblings working in what we call white-collar jobs. You have to take a break to go see anybody. But, you see, I could decide to take a break and say go. Relationships have grown more because I'm an artist. Today they are beginning to say, "Thank God he eventually became an artist." And it has affected our lives positively, much more than they expected, as well as mine. So today, everybody is excited that I have followed my bliss.

Is there any inspirational memory or advice that you have received that stuck with you?

I always remember what I just said about Professor Chika Aniakor. When you enter the university to study art, you are taught formal art. So, they tell you this is how you do it in the first year or two. After your second or third year, you begin to break out to find your voice. The day Professor Aniakor came and said, "Listen, Gerard, you can mix any two colours in any artwork, and they will come out well." Because we were taught that if you are going towards green, you better not put a purple. When he said that, he grew my confidence to try out things. And that's what I love about the University of Nigeria Nsukka. They push you to experiment. I also recall something. The very first day I carried my bags from the eastern part of Nigeria to this part. I landed in the night, and I didn't know what to do. Of course, I went to ask somebody where the art department was and went straight to the place with my boxes but didn't know what to do. I sat there, and something caught my eye, and I went closer. It was a newspaper clipping on a noticeboard that said an artist from Nsukka won Osaka Prize, third place. And I said, "Wait, do you mean that an artist can enter a competition? Far away from Africa, in Japan and get out? I didn't know that art was as big as this or could even take you somewhere. I didn't know that. So, when I looked at what it was, it was a small printout, and it was El Anatsui. And he had, you know, won a competition at the Osaka Biennale in Japan. You know, I didn't know what it was, but I knew that it was important. That stuck in my memory. I'd pick these two things and many things that inspired me. I remember these little words here and there that made me believe, in fact, in the first year. And it's funny a bit because in the first year after I saw that caption, I went to do a piece immediately. I started as a student. I went to do a piece I believed was solid and said, "This, I will enter for Osaka." Let me shock you. When I was graduating and packing my things, I found that same piece of art under my stove as a tablecloth, where I used to cook. Over the years, it had become something less important than I used to think. That was significant because it tells us that ideas will progress. What inspired me to try it out? You can do it. Why not try a few other things? And so even up until now, I still experiment a lot just because of that foundation.

Following from that, were there any artists that inspired you and are there any artists that inspire you in your work or in your way of working or seeing the art?

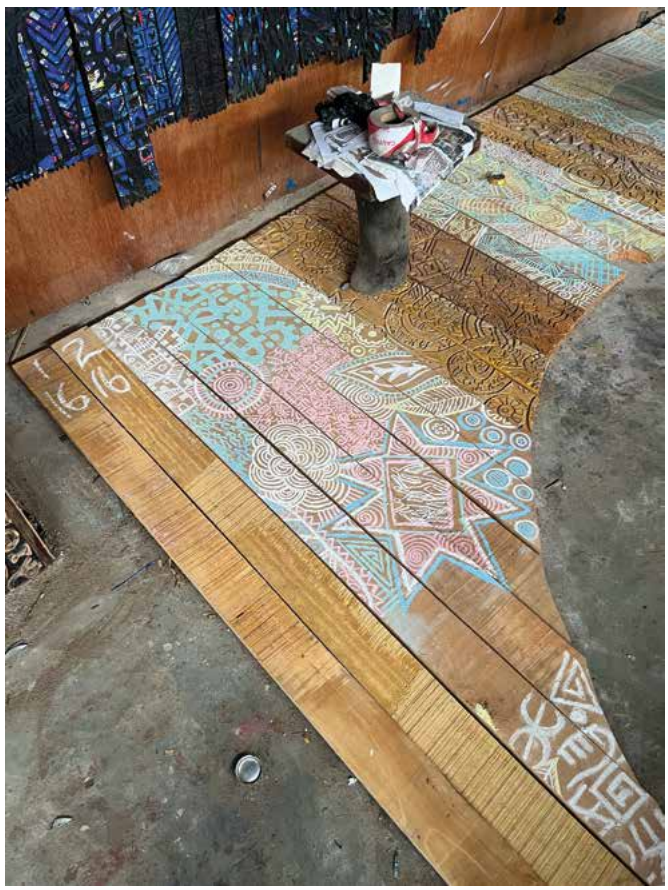
On paper, I was supposed to be a painter because I studied painting. And I studied artists in school. A few artists shocked me; Rembrandt was one. I loved to see his work because of his play with light and darkness. I loved the way a spark of light would disintegrate darkness. I loved it so much. And so, Rembrandt was beautiful. Now, that was far from when I saw Chijioke Onuora's work; it was as if it were flat. And I said, wait, something else is happening. Many artists have inspired me along the line, and I'll give you a shot. When I started doing wooden panels, I didn't use to beat aluminium sheets on them until I came to Lagos and walked into an exhibition. I saw a few works and I didn't understand what it was. They were brutally sweet. I didn't understand what material he used, but it felt like metal. And I was intrigued, and I thought the metal was beautiful. I had thought that metal was too strong. I didn't know any form of metal could be so malleable and well done that it felt like fabric. That inspired me immediately. That was my first encounter with the works of Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya.

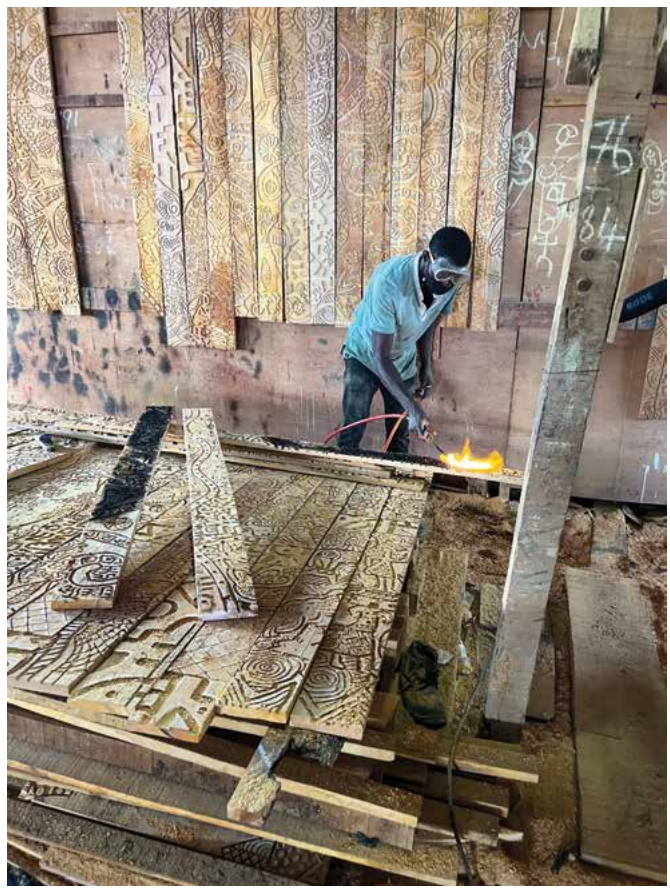
When I graduated from university, a lady came from France for an exchange program. And because I'm always in the university, they asked me to take her around and show her everywhere. I was taking her around and she said, I want to go to El's studio. El Anatsui, Professor El. I took her there and they opened it for her to look. That was the first time I encountered Professor El's works; it was sheer ecstasy. I walked in and I saw wooden materials everywhere. And the first thought that came to me was: These are beautifully carved works, but shouldn't they have more colours? That's what I told myself. It was the painter in me talking. But that encounter remained for a while. And when I started to evolve from painting, wood came into play. Some of the ideas came here and there, and then, I began to beat aluminium into the work. It came from Gustav Klimt when I saw his works in a museum. Somebody gifted me a book on Gustav Klimt, and I was reading. These people went in somewhere in their spirit and came out with something. And so, it inspired me to also try to get into my spirit and discover some of my deep feelings. Because we are all energies and energy attracts like energies. My energy had no alternative than to capture some of these energies and try to form another energy, which eventually form other new energies. As a student, I spent some time with Professor Krydz Ikwuemesi at his house. He had a certain strange bright orange that he used on his art works, which also got caught up in my spirit. And my next few works had oranges in them. So, I keep getting inspired. Yesterday I was at a gallery, and tomorrow my works may come out with captured energies from the gallery. And I think that's why art is very beautiful and dynamic.

And could you tell me a little bit more about your artistic process? What sort of ideas inform your work?

There are two parts to this question; what informs the techniques that I use and what informs my ideas. The technique is a bit painstaking. It takes a little while with the heavy wood; we try to shape them into sizes we want and then leave them on the wall, hanging them blank like that, and start interacting with them every day. The more I talk

to them, the more they tell me what to do. Then we begin to sketch and then carve, of course, and from carving to the point where we have to burn it for two reasons; to tune the wood so that it is sort of baked and then also to deal with anything inside. And then we give it a beautiful black colour that is usually the base. When I begin to apply colours, first, there are two coats of colours. But while you apply the colour, you also sand it off. And so, some of them seep into the wood grains to give it that in-depth feeling. And then from there, I bring it to the studio again when I begin to put the metals, the aluminium sheets and all that. Of course, the aluminium sheets are another process altogether. We get the cans, cut them all out, flatten them, beat them into shapes before I start to cut them to the shapes of the panel. The process is a bit painstaking. It may not be completely understood unless you watch it through. And this process, from cutting the wood to beginning to work, will take about a month because you have to get the wood, season it a bit, and plane it to the particular shape you want. You have to slice it to the sizes you want. That takes about a week or two, and then you start to sketch. So, it's a process of ideas.





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I often say that ideas come from a storage in our memory. And when they come out, we often don't know they came from a storage. We always think that it is what we saw yesterday. Things that happened to me many years ago are erupting on my pictorial ground now. And because I'm a bit experienced, having done this for about 30 years, I'm beginning to realize that this idea didn't just happen now. It's what happened to me 15 years ago. I was once a wanderer. The ten years from when I finished secondary school to when I entered the university, I wandered about. I was carried away by the wind, like migration. And it was forced migration because I didn't realize who I really was, so I migrated with the wind. It's only today I'm beginning to tell the story of migration, not realizing it. And of course, migration is a big topic now, but I was talking about my migration and didn't realize that. So, ideas form in the subconscious for a long time. My ideas come from everywhere. I try to narrow them down to certain things like migration, which I've worked on for a while in different contexts. I don't usually like to say my ideas come from a particular place. It may be difficult to do that, being a true artist. Everything inspires me. The interaction we have today could inspire something in the next five years. How do I explain? How do I explain that idea? And ideas and thoughts are things when they get into us, they begin to cook like food. And the ingredients that get into the pot never come out the same way. If I say I had ideas about migration, by the time they come out onto the pictorial ground, they have been cooked to become something else. But the foundation could come from migration.

I'm a bit shy to say sometimes, but I've had three near-death experiences and I mean near-death experiences and terminal issues that have been resolved. You understand that everything comes out of these experiences. Ideas sometimes don't even matter. It is the process that becomes more important often than the final thing.

I am sorry about that. Do you want to talk about the studio? What are the two locations for? And do you work with other people?

Yes, there are two studios.

Do I work with people? Yes. The studios came by default. I didn't plan it, but as I started to work, I realized that every time I finished a piece and brought it to an exhibition, I realized that no matter how much I cleaned it, there was still dust in it. So, I realized that was from the carvings, the burning, the chiselling, and the beating, and we needed a cleaner space for putting the final touches, the metal work, the paintwork. So, I realized that when you come out from the studio, the paint gets blurred sometimes because dust has been trapped in it. Initially, we used to expand the studio. We work here, go to the other site and try to finish. And so, I have two studios here. If you come to my first studio, it is a studio where all the raw materials are. That we call the Shrine and that's where we conjure the spirits, and they begin to be reawakened.

And then we move it here, which is another studio. The second part is a bit cleaner. You know that to take out the issue of the dust and all the raw things running around

it. Over the years, I've worked with many people, but we've narrowed it down to the Fantastic Six, who have become family now. Many of them have worked with me for about ten years. We are family; we understand each other, eat together, and work together. And so, yes, these assistants understand the ideas that come out. Do I really call them my assistants? No, we're just friends. But the process needs to be divided. Some people are more skilled in cutting wood. We have a carpenter, somebody skilled as a woodsman, who will nail the things together to make them perfect. We have people who cut the planks to the correct size because they understand the size I need. And then we have people who are so good at cutting the used cans and find that easy. We have tried to work with people, and it's made the work not easier but seamless because, for a creative, you really need to sit down and think. You need to interact with the work. Too many activities could take you away from the purity of the message you want to give. That's why a studio should be a shrine. When you try to get involved in so many things, you want to go get the wood and cut it; when are you going to work?

Working is intercourse. When you want to put on the TV, cook the hot water, bring the food. You reduce the time of intercourse, and it's no more lovable. The connection will disappear. Working with assistants has helped me such that sometimes I can sit back and look. Instead of doing anything, I begin to discuss with the material. I begin to interact with the material. I begin to intercourse with the material. That which a lot of activities wouldn't have allowed me to do. Yes, it's a beautiful thing. And it's something I discovered that I love it.

What's your schedule like?

Working in these two studios, because they are about one hour apart, I have to plan my week perfectly. On Mondays, we all meet together because we need to talk about what happened the week before, what will happen this week, what mistakes we made, why this wood is not perfect, and why we got this right also. So, Monday is like a meeting day; we all meet in studio two, where we do the final work and then discuss. That's like a rest day, really. Then on Tuesday, I have to go to the Shrine because we have talked and now it's time to do some work. Sometimes I go to the Shrine and the studio every day because I start early, at about 6:00 in the morning. We go to this place and work till before the sun rises. You do a bit and then return this way. When I started, it was a bit distracting. Because, for art, you have to stay. But I've had these two studios for about 15 years, so it's now a lifestyle. I know when to go. During Covid, when we were locked down, we all moved to the Shrine. Everyone lived and worked there. We had an alternative to the studio. One was very effective. Because the one was made to take in everything, to start and finish the work. So, the two work and it's become seamless. But I divide the work into two, if it's not a very busy time, three days here, three days here. It has worked perfectly.

Can you tell us a bit more about the development of your practice and how it's changed over the years?

My practice has changed over the years. It's a bit dramatic because, like I said earlier, I studied painting. When I got to the university, I had options: painter, sculptor, textile designer, graphic designer, or ceramicist. I was divided. The department was called the Department of Fine and Applied Arts. And I love it because it makes me understand that you can do art; it can be fine or applied. As a painter and throughout university, I loved colours and still do. Colours tell my story the best way. As I kept working on canvases, I realised I wanted more texture. And my canvases became texturized even more. But at that point, I knew that something else was calling. A medium that felt like me was calling. And so, I found wood. Now, there's a reason why I started using wood. I didn't just use wood because it was the next medium, because I tried many things. I had used everything you can find. I made sure I experimented on anything. But I used wood because of the character of the wood.

Wood is lovable. Wood can give and wood can take without complaining. Once you understand wood, wood will accommodate you. And wood will give freely without asking for anything in return. Now, this is the kind of nature I have, and wood became a good marriage for me. And so today, many people know my art as wooden panel works. However, you will be shocked whenever you get close because you always think it's fabric or a canvas. Because I have worked wood to the point where you often don't know it is wood anymore. That is not the destination. That's a process that I found very intriguing because now we can see, like I saw when I was growing up as an artist, that wood can be malleable and accommodate. You can play with wood and wood is also answering your games. Something else happened along the line. I realized that the wood would call me to say, "This is what I want you to do," or "This is how I want to be dressed. No, I like my hair to be higher than that." Now, that was a deeper level. It wasn't happening in my first five, ten years. So, it has evolved, but I don't think it has changed. My love for colour is evident in everything. Carving wood today is like priming the canvas for me because it's a process. Even the primed canvas will tell the kind of work that will be done on it. A well-primed canvas will always produce better artwork, so every process is important. The same care you take when you prime a canvas is the same care you take when you're carving. Every work is layered, from the plain wood to the sketches, to the carving, and then to the burning. Have I moved from painting to sculpture? I didn't go anywhere. I just found another pictorial ground that fell in love with me, and I fell in love with it. And we are moving on happily. We could get a few more partners into this game tomorrow, and we're happy. The thing is, am I enjoying myself? Yes. Second question: Is this medium enjoying itself? Yes. Everything, as I say, has got energy. The wood speaks. You can only hear if you're trained to listen to this wood. And if it's uncomfortable, you will know. If you're being unfaithful, they will revolt. And so, the work process may have changed, but the idea is still the same. Colour tells my best story. I have tried to be muted, and I find myself going back to

it; it's in the spirit. The movement is for intellectual purposes. Otherwise, I'm still the same. And in another and many other years, I'll still be the same. Yeah, I'll be the same. Energy can only change form. You cannot disappear.

What other materials do you use and how do they enhance your work?

I want to talk about the aluminium that I beat on the work. When you come to Lagos as a village boy who left a village, the first thing you think is the Bar Beach because you think you have arrived in the Bahamas. So, once I landed in Lagos, the next morning, I was at the beach because, even though I had a lake where I came from, the beach was different. It's the Atlantic Ocean. When I got to the beach, I was shocked a bit. I saw cans lying about. I had seen pictures of beaches. And you know, pictures of beaches are always nice, as if everything is arranged. But I saw cans everywhere, so something broke a chord in my mind. The artist in me woke up. Cans? They're colours. These cans have all the colours. It's a huge palette. So, I started picking them up. I didn't even know I would use them, but I kept them. First, I wanted to rid the Bar Beach of those cans. Then we started to take them off the street. I also like to pride myself a bit as an environmentalist because we take a huge amount of these cans out of the street. In fact, when I started to do this, I used as many as 500 to 1000 empty cans on each work. And as we continue using them, we realize they started disappearing. In fact, if you go somewhere on the beach, you will not find one unless it was discarded yesterday. People now pick them because it has become not just my palette but a source of income. And so now I can't even find them to pick. So, people pack them and come, and we pay for them. And if you come to the Shrine, you see a heap because we buy them. In fact, yesterday, I paid for a huge consignment. Still, I felt so comfortable and glad

 Gerald Chukwuma's assistant in his studio, June 2023

that something that started from imagination had started to tell a story and put money and food on people's tables. Once the school is on vacation, you find kids trying to help their mother; they bring it in bags. If you go now, you can't find them anymore. We have done something. I'm not the only one. The materials do not just talk about making an aesthetic work but also solve a problem for our community. And that also makes me glad because it didn't happen because I planned it. It happened because right inside of me, something was speaking.

You know, if you're painting on a canvas, sometimes you want to paint in blue. If I want to use my aluminium can palette, I may realize I can't find enough blues. And so, we shifted gears a bit, which is another beautiful thing involving the community. And so, where the second studio is, we buy cartons of canned drinks of the colour we want and give them to the community. They drink it, and they give us the cans back. So, it was a win-win, and they are always eager to see what we've got. We're beginning to affect the community again. And they all love us for it. Every week or two, we have to get a certain drink. It has formed a bond between myself, the community, and the people that work with me. So, it's become much more than just art. It's now life. And I think that's what art is, life.

What do you want the spectator to think or feel in front of your work?

That's something I have to really think about. How do I want to feel and think in front of my work? Because my work is a solution for me first, it's therapy. For me, it is a joy first. You can't give what you don't have. Every time I approach any of my works, if I feel peace, then I have made a statement. But it's relative also and depends on who is looking at it. And so, I don't concern myself too much with how they will feel, or they will think because your experiences can make two people feel differently about the same thing. But I tried to let my work soothe the pains I have had and hope it will soothe those who have the same pains that I had. And so many of my works are happy, even though they tell a sad story. Because we can always live in the place, we don't want to live in. And so, my art is oftentimes an escape route. Now, I have scored if you see my work and feel joy from pain.

Do I feel so? Yes. Do I know that? I feel so, yes. I said earlier that I had three near-death experiences, and I mean near-death experiences. Not just a joke. It only took the grace of God and what he has given us to do because I believe that what you have to do is part of your escape route, doing the right thing.

When I go to the artworks, when I work, or I look at them, I observe them, or I enjoy them, the pains disappear. And I have seen people react in the same way. And they stay and you can see the light on their face. There's a smile. And then they ask: "How did you do this? What are you thinking?" I don't even know what I was thinking when I was doing it. It was just coming from something inside that I was trying to also give myself peace about. And so, when I talk about migration, for instance, I don't mean the

movement of people. It is what many people look at when they talk about migration. Migration, moving the effects of migration here. There's the migration of the mind. There's the migration of the soul. The spirit migrates every second. It's not just the body. And so, I expect my work to first give you peace no matter what it is. And no matter what we are going through, you should be able to find peace in each work in your own way. But sincerely, I don't put in my mind what you think, what they think, or what I know. I don't put it in my mind because how do I satisfy every energy? So I do myself first. And once I begin to feel peace, I know some people feel peace. Because, for some, you know, Instagram is a beautiful space. You know, social media is a beautiful space. You see smiling faces everywhere. But that's not what goes on underneath. I know people are going through things. And if they can look at my work and find a little peace, I find joy. I do every piece hoping that somebody will find peace from that work. And I have only one yardstick-myself. So, I wake up very early, go to the studio, sit like I'm sitting now, observing each line, and smile. I play some soft music. They go hand-in-hand, really. I'm a lover of reggae. I like Buju Banton. I play some root vibes, and I cross my legs. If there's chaos in that work, I'll feel it. I'll be uncomfortable moving around. And it's the work calling and saying, "Listen, I'm not done. I'm not done. Come on, my hair is scattered. Can you arrange it a bit for me? Listen, this sock is not fitting me. Well, can you put another colour? I need a better shoe. I'm walking on cold ground." The work is speaking now. The work would be because, over the years, I've told the works that I want peace. If it's not giving peace, they are also uncomfortable. They don't find peace in themselves. That's really the best I can explain it. While I can't satisfy every need, once I start to satisfy that inner peace, I know someone will also enjoy that.

And the inspiration of your colour palette? Does each colour have a specific signification?

Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. I like the saying, "Deep calls unto deep." I like it a lot. I'm a big believer in energies. I understand that the subconscious is more significant than the conscious. It is something I know. It may sound like fiction, but it's true. I was once surrounded by four people who had arms. That was one of my near-death experiences. And as I speak with you, I don't know how I left that place. But I know that God had a hand in it. It may sound like fiction, but it's true. Deep call unto deep. The colours are the colours. You can only know one, and your mood can also produce the blues, reds, whites, or greens. But I am sure that they start calling once you start producing the greens, the reds, and the whites. If you refuse the call, you will make a work you may not be satisfied with. So sometimes I feel blue. I don't know the meaning of how to feel blue, but I feel blue. I hear that red wants to shoot out. The works I make always have many colours, even though sometimes they appear to be one colour, because the process ensures that once I'm done with the black, I put a coat, maybe a green coat, and I sand it off. If you look at the grind, you see the green. Then I do that two or three times just because I want a rainbow of colours that appear to be white. When you look at the diamond, it seems to be white until you pass light through. That's how life is. It might appear blue, but green, yellow, and pink and orange are right underneath. And so can I say that the colour has a meaning. It's not the only colour

there. It's an array of colours. And so even when you see my work as one colour, it's not one colour. Everybody is like that somehow. It's the story of my life. There are layers. People only see Gerald the artist. I wish I could tell all the story and its layers. And so, colours come.. The heart can decide the colour, but the colour will decide the one that will come. It's like drinking beer. First you drink a beer. Then the beer needs a beer. Then the beer needs the man.

Does the length and the shape of every wood panel have a significance?

No, they don't because my work is organic. What happens is that they come in panels, and the tendency to increase the panels always happens, or likewise reduce the panels. I never start off with the size. Even if I have sizes in my mind, they never end up like that. That's what I mean. I put the certain size, thinking that's what I want to do, and I end up moving from that. So, are they significant? Not really. I've been confined to doing certain things like that. And sometimes, I even abandoned the project because I couldn't help myself. They don't really mean so much if you ask me. But is there anything without a meaning? Sometimes the meaning can come from the subconscious, and you don't know why. Later, in time, we may know why. But for now, it isn't clear yet.

You graduated from the University of Nigeria, which has a strong tradition of artists being part of a movement, the Nsukka group. Do you identify yourself with the group or were the traditions of Nsukka school still very resonant when you arrived at the school?

When we got into the university, we were told about the Nsukka School. I think the name is just because of where it is coming from. Do I think I'm part of that school? Well, I started from that school. Chika Okeke, Obiorah Udechukwu, Olu Oguibe, El Anatsui, Chike Aniakor, and Chijioke Onuorah – these people started a movement. Because remember when some of these schools started, there was no art in Nigeria, and they had to have an identity. The Nsukka school is my foundation because I grew up knowing everything about art from there. I call myself part of the Nsukka group in the intellectual sense. But I think we are all global artists or global people and that's how we were created to be, to interact and become one. It's one big fireball moving. But this group of people we're talking about influenced my early artistic life. It was only their works we saw. It was only their teachings we had. From there, we started to grow, but at that point, we had to move on too and that doesn't mean we forgot where we came from. It's placed in our spirit because revelation is progressive. But let's think about this. There's a truth and that is a higher truth. There's a light and there's a higher light. Yes, but they all come from one light. The moon shines in the night, but it takes the light from the sun. But that doesn't take away the fact that the moon is important. So, the Nsukka school is a beautiful school that started the journey, but the journey is continuing.

20 *Moonlight Dance*, 2021, mixed media on wood, 213.4 x 322.6 cm

Did having a degree change your art practice? Was it a positive experience?

It took a while before I got into the university. But going into the university, my purpose was to make the best of my life out of my life because I was almost counted out as a human being that has a purpose. After ten years, remember? And that ten years I had done everything from sweeping and hawking on the streets to doing everything I could do other than criminal activity. I'd done everything. I'd washed the roof. Even my parents thought, "What's wrong with him?" So going into Nsukka, I had two purposes. One is art that I love. Two, I had to become a human being. One of the things that this university did for me was to return me to a cause, which really is the art cause. And then I started to read art and, you know, I read painting and graduated as a painter.

I tried to prove to myself that I could do something. And so, I worked hard and graduated as a painter with first in class. I found out I was trying to tell myself, "You can do it, or you are good enough. You're not a layabout," because that's the perception people had about me. Where we come from, if you don't finish secondary school and enter the university at once, you're a wayward person. You are a useless person, especially if you have tried to enter and it didn't work out. But what did going to school do for my art career? That's a beautiful angle. I would argue that school positions you in who you already are. I was already an artist in my heart, but it's like the fire, the flame, and the coal. The flame can cook but will consume and even kill. The coal will still cook but may not consume and kill. The university will take out the flame out of you and help you become a long burning coal. Then all you need to do is fan it again and again, and it will continue to cook. But the flame, if you fan it too hard, it will go off. And that's what you are if you don't sometimes pass through tutelage. Passing through school helped me meet certain beautiful, wonderful minds. These lecturers, professors, doctors, students, and everyone who helped shape who you see today and who you will see tomorrow. And I could have been an artist also if I didn't go to the university, but I could have been a flame that would die quickly. Or a flame that would consume me and other people. So, the university, it's a place of learning, but also a place of learning character. I learned to be a better artist going through the university. That's the truth. Because of the array of minds, the multitude of minds that have to interact with. You may never find that group of people again in your career or life in one place. The university didn't just shape my art career; it shaped my mind and my character. And I give thanks that I passed through the university. It was tough, but I passed through.

Are you an Igbo? How does this influence your work? How are you influenced by the culture?

Am I Igbo? Yes. Does this influence my work? Yes. There's something I always say. "I*gbo Dika Echi … Echi adighi Agwu Agwu*" means "Igbo is like tomorrow and tomorrow never finishes." Tomorrow will continue. And that's the character of the Igbo man. Was I born in that? Yes. And that's why through the years, as I do art, I realized that that's one spirit dimension that is moving me forward. Because when you meet a lot of obstacles and you continue, there's something else other than yourself. So, does it influence

me? Yes. Something deep down that we were created with. It's like saying that they play a lot of football in Brazil. Is it that they don't play football every other place? This is something that came from a spirit realm, and you can't change it. No amount of anything can change it. No pushing from the world can change it. No singing praises can change it. It is there. So, it influences my work. And that's why my work often talks about the brighter side, no matter what has happened, because I believe in a future that is always better than the past. The part of the shining light that shines brighter and brighter unto the perfect day. That's the Igbo spirit. And I live it even in my work.

In your work you use Uli and Nsibidi symbols. What is the relationship you have with these symbols? And can you tell us a bit more about the historical use of these symbols and what you want them to communicate within the context of your work.

The Uli and the Nsibidi symbols have been there before we were even born, and some of us, like myself, found them by default. I didn't know anything until I got into Nsukka. And that's because it was part of things studied in art history. Uli really is a name given to an indigo dye that is used for cosmetic and clinical purposes, but beyond that, also for Igbo aesthetics. And therefore, it crept into my work by default because when I got into Nsukka, I didn't know anything about Uli. I was painting, doing other things, but I realized that certain motif and ideas were creeping in. However, I cannot say now that it is still raw in my works, there is a foundation of Uli, yes. Is there a foundation of Nsibidi? Yes, but like English, that took some parts from many languages and from other languages and formed English. The base, Uli has spread in my work that I have now developed my language out of it which I'm yet to find a name for, it erupted from Uli. The symbols mean certain things, but over the years, they've metamorphosed into a full-blown butterfly. So, they don't resemble the moth anymore. But remember that it is a cultural thing, and we leave that culture out. Would I be called a Uli artist? No. But an artist who infuses the roots of Uli in his work. Although in many of my works, you see scarifications because you know it's a language that is yet to be understood, even by myself. And so, we keep speaking it until we can tell the story in the future. But it isn't proper to box me or any artist as a Uli artist. It's too small. There are so many other things you can find in the pieces and in every other art that came from the Nsukka school, much more than that.

Most of the traditional Uli artists are women but the artists who were in the Nsukka school were men. Why do you think that is?

This question is very interesting because we have to understand the culture first. When Uli started, what followed, and the culture when art started to flourish in schools. Remember that I said earlier that it is used as a cosmetic and clinical dye, even though it's cultural. Uli was used to paint the body, and then it got transferred to the walls of the houses, but first the body. When the women came out to dance or show themselves, they used this Uli to decorate their bodies. And so that's the culture; what culture has brought about is probably where it came from, and that's why women

practice it more. But it moved on to become an art form. Then they started doing it on walls and all that, and so the progression followed. Simple. Now, when the Nsukka school started, there were not many women who wanted to even study art. Which woman was going to study art at that point? It wasn't even popular for any person! It took almost some boldness to say, "I want to do art." The culture didn't allow for that. The first group of people who got into the Nsukka school were incidentally men. When I was a student in the Nsukka, the sculpture department had only one female. Only one female sculptor in the entire department. You can understand that numbers play a role in most outcome I don't want to look at it in anything deeper than that because everything comes from a constructive circumstance.

Uli art is supposed to be temporary, and the tradition passed down by practitioners. In contrast, the medium you use in your art is more permanent or made to last time. Are you trying to create a more permanent art, or do you think you will need to still transmit your method and your way to provide a message to your generation of artists?

Uli art is often temporal, cleaned up after it's done. Everything is evolving. That means that if we find things that don't work, we can make it better. It is the reason why we don't have documentation. Let me tell you the story about one project I did, called The Igbo Landing. It's a project that had to do with people who were taken as slaves from the eastern part of Nigeria and were taken to the US. These are Igbo people. Halfway there they revolted, took over the ship and they walked back into the sea. They chose suicide instead of slavery. Why did I bring up this story? Someone asked me, "Did you hear about this?" And I said, "No." He said," Why don't you check it?" And I went to almost every library in Nigeria, and I didn't see a story about this. That told me something. You can't find material about something as big as this that has happened to your people and shows who they are, the resilience of the woman, the strength. We don't have data. And so, yes, I hope that my work can be data for the future. I hope my work can be research material. That's why I take time to make durable works that have some power that can even impose because I want to tell our stories by myself in the right way. And I want people to turn and look at those stories, not just ignore them. Because some of the things we had as art, like you're talking about-we don't know anything about. And that could have been a huge library. But we know nothing. I don't think it's been documented much. Why? Probably it wasn't permanent like the Benin bronzes, like the Nok terracotta. When we talk about Uli and Nsibidi for instance, you may see more. And then we can dive deep down to find out what informed these works and find out more about who we are. Some of the things that we are told differently and we're trying to correct with our works. That's why we tell stories. That's why I tell stories.

Does living in Lagos but still being influenced or having been influenced by Uli art create a unique mix of influence in your work?

Of course, living in Lagos woke me up. I came from Nsukka, where we slept by 6:00 in the evening or 7:00 and where the day ended by 8 or 9 pm. Then suddenly, I'm transported to Lagos, where the day starts at 9 pm. Now something had to happen to me and, of course, to whatever I produced, including my art. And then the forms of life. For instance, I could wake up in the morning in Nsukka and walk down to wherever. You can't try that here. You'll be left behind. So, what happened? My speed changed. My communications changed. Do you know that when I travel and come back to Lagos, my spirit changes as soon as I get into the Lagos airport because it starts to think differently? There is no way the city you live in will not affect your art, especially because art is from the soul. And that's why it may be very difficult for me to leave this country to go anywhere because this is where my ideas erupt. Even if I go somewhere else, other ideas erupt there, but this is a base. Lagos has changed a lot, even in my narratives. In my narratives, in my colours, it became more vibrant. When I came, it was a bit muted even in my colours and my carvings were a bit scanty. But as I got in, everything was happening at the same time. One phone call, one car passing, everything happens at the same time in Lagos, and my work started to follow suit at once. I had to deliberately tell myself to relax. And so maybe my works were almost chaotic for one or two years. I had to return back and try to bring in Lagos and then bring in where I came from so that they would try to merge an agreement. I was affected even in ideas. Where I grew up, you could hardly find many different ethnic groups. So, migration, which I talk about sometimes, started to play differently too. I started to see how people have migrated and how that has turned Lagos also. And it reflected in my work. And it will continue. Lagos, it will tell anybody who lives here. His life is different. His life is different. Yes.

In the past you refer to some of your work as scrolls. Can you explain a bit more about what you mean by that?

I refer to some of my works as scrolls, but that was a metaphor. I had that exhibition titled "Eclipse of the Scrolls," and I tried to look at eclipse at one point. What is an eclipse, for instance? Something covering something, and you are not able to see the reality anymore. And I looked at scrolls as documentation and communication that was masked. In that exhibition, I asked: "Are we acting out a script written for us? Who wrote this script and why?" The amount of information that is brought to the fore determines how we behave and how we react. Therefore, if we are told a lie, we'll be living a lie all our lives. So, the scrolls have been eclipsed. Are they existing? Yes. When there's a total eclipse, the sun doesn't disappear. Something covers the sun. It's like if somebody was born during the eclipse and asked, "Was there a sun?" and you say, "No, I didn't see a sun." But the sun is there. That's what happened to our lives, especially in this part of the world. And so, people have told us stories for many years. Could we be acting out what they said, who they said we are? And there are many examples.

Can I go there? Someone comes in and tells us that, you know what, polygamy is wrong. I don't advocate polygamy in any way, but that idea came from someone. From a group of people, the same group of people who say that even though polygamy was wrong, maybe another form of union is right. Why do we agree to that kind of union? Do you understand what I'm trying to say here? It's an eclipse. Who named the name native doctor? What's the difference between a doctor and a native doctor? Someone came from somewhere, met a group of people doing certain things about healing before they showed up. And then they said that because your healing method is different, you're not a doctor but a native doctor. They eclipsed the scroll and relegated the doctors of those times to a negative bunch. And we have been acting out all our lives. Can I get into something a bit deeper? Covid-19. Who said the cure didn't come from Africa? I want the person to come and tell me. Who said there was no cure in Africa? Because let us look at the data we know. It's not a beautiful story to tell because we were all in a panic at the time. People dying wasn't anything to talk about and laugh about. But could we have even looked deeper and said, wait, why is it that the Africans were sort of immune to the virus? Could it be that there was a cure already? We were using it without knowing. We should have explored it a bit. But no, the scrolls were eclipsed, so we continue to act it out. So, I had that exhibition. Pre-colonial...post-colonial. And it's still playing out. So that's why it is important that we tell our story. And the story doesn't have to be perfect. Who is the judge? The same person who eclipsed the scroll? If an artist is doing an artwork and is asked what inspired it, I say, "I don't know." It's okay not to know. He doesn't have to know. Because who is the judge? It's a deep thing for me. The scrolls have been eclipsed. We don't see reality anymore. And so, we play out the tunes played by people who probably did not understand who we are and who wanted to be served forever.

You also work on the sculpture. Can you tell us a bit more about them? What are the materials you use for?

Again, that came from an instruction. When I say an instruction, I mean I wanted to tell a story, and that was the only way to tell it. It was about the Igbo landing. From my research, I found out that about seventy-five people were taken, and fifteen bodies were recovered. One day I was in my place. Where I come from is a lake, and I took some people, some tourists, to go and look across the lake. And as I was trying to cross across the lake, suddenly, the boat croaked and went off, and it was around 6:00 in the evening and we were all in the middle of the lake. So, we called for backup. And while the guy was still working on the boat, I looked up and saw something like an illusion. I don't know what to call it. As if something rose from the water. And that's what my mind saw. That image, the sculptures you saw. If you look at the sculptures, they're faceless. They're faceless and they don't have limbs and legs. So, I was just trying to say also that this could represent anybody. And so, it could have been anybody who was anybody taking those seventy-five. It could have been anybody never coming back again. And the issue is I just wanted to leave a sculpture that can be referred to. Because I looked, and I didn't see any data. I didn't see any information. So, I told myself, I'm going to tell

this story. I'm going to tell it through a monumental piece that it can stay to stand the test of time. And it represents those seventy-five people who were taken and then this is what they did because of who they are. This monument represents them. That's the London series. There are seventy-five of them. We're still working on them and have done more than 50%. They will be completed, and we'll show them. And then when we show them, they and the materials will remain and be written about. And so, my child will wake up tomorrow and say, I heard about this, and I will say, go to that museum. It's there. You can read about it. And that's one of the reasons why I moved from the normal panel to sculptures that can tell the story the best way it should be told. They are sculpture made from cold cast, fibre glass and aluminium.

Mmaturunonu; The Princess, 2017-2021, mixed media, 193 x 104 x 206 cm

You have also worked with furniture in the past. What is the idea behind your work merging with functional?

I love being a fine and functional artist and for a reason. Remember that when we made art in the past, it was for a purpose. Every artwork made in the past by our forefathers was for a purpose. All the Benin bronzes that were taken away were for a purpose. Apart from the aesthetic value, meanings, and ideas, art could be functional too. That's one part. Second part. I'm a big advocate of the fact that an artist should be more. Let me tell you what happened. I came to Lagos and because I finished first in class, companies that didn't have anything to do with art invited me to go and work. I asked them, "Why are you inviting me to come?" They said, "If you make a first-class in art, it means you can do anything." And that shocked me a bit. I asked them, "Do you have an art department where I can fit in?" And they said, "No, you can fit in anything." Why can't art have an industry also? Because everybody is not going to paint or sculpt, but they're artists in their own right. Why can't we have an institution also? From my class, over fifty people graduated, and less than 10% are practicing art. Not that they did not want to practice. They wanted to, but in another dimension and the art scene didn't encourage it. Who said a great artist will not be a better dressmaker? So, it's in my quest to become much more than just what they say an artist is. That's why I love Leonardo da Vinci. It's because somebody's thinking beyond. It's much more than just the colours. The colours are important, but what more? In my first year, I didn't know the materials, but I went to meet people who knew them. And we started making furniture. You know, sometimes they didn't work out. Sometimes we sold them, sometimes we used them. But that entered my spirit. And is it even furniture? A car can be an artwork. A dress can be an artwork. That's why every organization wants their products to look better, not just feel better. And so, a phone will make a new model and add something. What's happening there? Aesthetics is being played out. So functional art, for me, was just art. And we have not scratched it. It's supposed to become another angle completely that some people will explore to the full as artists and still be fulfilled, that they have lived their lives as artists without somebody telling them it's less than art because it's functional. We have put all those functional things in a bulletproof glass and still look at them as art today. It's just art.

On your panel works, we often see representations of faces changing over the wood panels. What is the meaning behind that?

Why do faces appear so much in my works? I didn't know why these faces erupted until suddenly, it dawned on me that it was from my years as a hawker. Even in the university, I hawked in my first year. I used to leave the university and go to another city where no one knew me, and I hawked because I had to pay my fees. But I found out that that's why I made these faces. Because I was an artist, I took note of all the faces I met and recorded them in my subconscious, and I didn't know that. When I started learning to do art, when I used to go to the roadside artists to learn, I had to sell my wares quickly. As a child, I could quickly tell from the facial expression who would buy my wares. I

would say, “These two will buy,” approach them and they would buy. I had formed the consciousness of who was going to buy just by looking at their faces because I wanted to go and do art. Because if I don’t finish my work and come home, my mother is going to spank me. I didn’t know it was forming something in my brain. My subconscious was recording because it never forgets anything. The data bank of the subconscious is a universe. Energy does not go anywhere. When I started to do art, they started to come out, faces in different forms. Even as I say it, I feel goosebumps because I now remember the faces I used to see when I used to walk. And that childhood played out more than 30 years later. That’s why we can’t always put art in a small box. What inspired you? How do I know? The subconscious dug it up. That made me see the streets of Port Harcourt and Owerri when I used to go out to hawk, you know? But it’s a good memory. It’s beautiful.

I want to go back to the idea of migration. You mentioned migration is one of the themes you often work with. Can you explain further?

Yes, migration is one of the things I talk about in my work. However, it’s less physical migration because I believe that there’s the migration of the mind. It’s more powerful than the migration of the body because your body can be here, and your mind is no more here. Now, we don’t talk about it often enough because we don’t know it’s happening, and we have not cared to look at it. Another migration happens in the body internally. Every man has a subconscious and conscious. There’s a migration happening there, too, that informs who you become. But there’s a bigger picture of the effects of migration, which is bodily migration. I mean, for instance, you are here for a purpose. Yesterday when we talked, and we had time, you ate our food with joy. It’s culture shifting. That’s what migration did for you. And now you can boldly say that I have tasted of this culture. That’s migration. It can be negative also. For instance, if a law enforcement agent meets you for any reason, how they react to you in a part of the world is different from how they do in another part of the world. Then you feel the bite, the pain.

Migration is a big part of my work. I have a belief that I’ve tried to portray. That every migration is forced. It’s not your will, even though you choose. Is it voluntary or involuntary? And that’s why for every migration, there’s something good to come out of it. Every migration has something good that comes out of it. We sometimes only focus on the negatives. Why do I say so? Because man was made to migrate. Spirits are free. We are more spirits than we are human. That’s why spirits have no limitations. That’s why spirits can pass through and come out the other side. Because man was originally made to be free. That’s why I get emotional a bit, you know? Covid did a thing to me a bit with this migration. I was having a show in Germany, a really beautiful show. I was supposed to paint a mural while at that show. Covid came. We had the show in May 2020, but I couldn’t go because of restrictions. And that’s the restriction on migration. The work I would do on that mural could have been talked about even now. Many people could have changed their perception of life because of that mural. That’s why

I'm against visa restrictions, especially for the creatives. Lately, I have wanted to go to France to see a few things and to Italy also to see the sculptures that we have read about in books, and they refused to give me a visa. And I felt pained because someone sitting somewhere with a piece of paper and a biro has reduced the dream to nothing, especially for the creative, whose minds only erupt when they migrate. You told me about the Mona Lisa yesterday and how France claims it. Cubism could not have happened if Pablo Picasso did not see African art. So, migration opens up possibilities. Somebody wants to see art, and then somebody writes, "No." What's that? That's a breach of human rights. That's a breach on being alive. Imagine if you were coming to do this very interesting documentary. And one officer writes and rejects you. It changes everything about not just you but about the artist, about the art industry, about the universe, everything. That's just a little of what migration is. But you see, migration that allows the free flow is all positive because it's important; it produces results all the time. And so, while I talk about the negatives, I also stay positive because I know that even though we think migration is a tough issue, it brings out the beauty in everything. I try to use my work to tell that story as much as I can, especially from my personal point of view. The last work I'm making is titled *The Iron Gate*. And why am I making it? Because somebody refused to give me a visa. By now, as we're having this interview, as we're talking about this now, I could have been talking about something else because of what I had seen. I could have been intrigued by the sculpture of David. I could have seen The Mona Lisa. I could have said that humans made this, and then that would grow. But it will still grow one way or the other.

Does being from Nigeria and Africa affect your work and if yes, how? Does travelling to various locations to display your work change the way you relate to your work? Have you had experiences where you come back with a different perspective or idea?

That's migration. Moving around affects who you are. Yes. So, I'll talk about this small thing that happened as a first-year student. A lecturer sent me to Lagos. It was my first time coming to Lagos, and he said to take this material to Lagos and told me who I was going to give it to. I took what we call a night bus, and I entered Lagos in the morning. And when I went to the address, it was a gallery called Didi Museum and as a young, naïve 100 level boy who didn't know much, I opened the gallery door and walked in. There was an exhibition there. Once I walked in, my soul melted. I had never seen anything like that in my entire life. I still remember the inscription on the title. It was titled *Soul Stirring* by an artist called Uche Edochie. My soul melted. I had never seen anyone make that kind of art in my life. It was a beautiful thing to behold. What happened to me? Movement. Once I got back to Nsukka, your guess is as good as mine; I painted everything from the eye of what I saw there. And that was a naive mind working, but a sincere one. Over the years, I've developed a bit and then travelled. Now if I go somewhere, I open my mind to take it all in because that's energy. Before I travelled for the first time, I never thought about making smaller works. I never thought about changing my materials to be easier for me to transport. I just thought I was making art. When I started to travel a bit to do exhibitions abroad, I found out that

sometimes it wasn't even easy to ship them. I had to start becoming a bit more creative about even packaging and all that. So, it affects not only what I produce or the outcome of my physical art but also the technicalities of how I do this. I still learned a few other things. How do you preserve wood more? How do you treat your wood better? What better pigments can you use? These are things I learned migrating from one place to the other, and it has improved. Culture crossing will improve you if you open your eyes. And it happened to me too.

Do you see your artistic practice as part of a wider, wider restoration effort to preserve Nigerian culture?

I'm an artist that lives in Nigeria and works in Nigeria. And so, yes, I tell the Nigerian story. I tell the African story. I tell the human story, but I come from this area and so from this perspective. We all have the same thing all over the world. Everything that happens to one person here has another form in another place. But differently, I tell the Nigerian story, and that's preserving it also. Because when I talk about the effects, I don't just talk about the effects of what not getting the visa did to me; I've told the story that I came from here. When I talk about Igbo landing, I'm trying to preserve something that is kind of supposed to be research material. I'm preserving it. It is important that we tell our stories. And that's what we're trying to do. What we used to know is what others told us. So, I'm trying to preserve what our children's children will see. And so, yes, it's just natural. Otherwise, you're wasting a lifetime.

Can you describe how you see Lagos, the second biggest city in Africa? What is it like living and working here?

I've been to a few places. I still want to go to many more. I don't think there's any place like Lagos. Let me tell you why. It is such a small place that hosts the most diverse population in Africa. We can talk about New York. But Lagos is this island that hosts the good, the bad, and the ugly. I think that's the best way to describe it. So much energy that you don't have to do anything but to be present to activate it. You can sit, and others will provide your energy for you. It is so contagious. You know, we have these yellow buses that we call *danfo* like shuttle buses. And I used to ask, is there a spirit guiding this? Because even if you were a humble, nice guy or lady, once you start driving it, you become almost crazy immediately. I love Lagos. Lagos is the only place where you sleep with one of your eyes open. No matter how much money you have or how much comfort you have. You cannot predict Lagos. I really love that because it's like the kind of work I do. In fact, part of the reason I am an artist today is that I have never been able to predict the outcome of my work. And that is so beautiful because I enjoy the outcome before everyone. And so, I'm not just the maker. I'm the spectator, too. That's beautiful. That's Lagos. Is there anything like that, a drone with an x-ray so we can see the whole of Lagos a in movement? We could write paragraphs for years. And so, the energy of Lagos is that everything happens every day at the same time. You think you have gone to this restaurant and it's perfect. Tomorrow, you see something

else. You think that beach is the best, next week there's another one looking better. you think that this art has broken all records? Yesterday I went to a gallery and spent the latter part of the evening relaxing there. And I was telling the owner, "Are you saying we have this number of great artists in Nigeria, alone inside Lagos?" You can find the best artists in the world here, and I mean it. And you don't even know them. Time and chance are what happens to them all. Lagos has the ability to produce results. It's in the DNA of Lagos. Music. Movies. Banking and finance. Agriculture. Governance. Creativity. This is the yardstick of Africa. Let me tell you something about spirits, about deities. When you do something consistently and constantly in a place, a spirit deity stays there. And so, when you come here, it begins to erupt in your life whether you like it or not. That's what's happening at Lagos. There's that spirit deity that lives that makes everyone want to hustle, want to bustle, want to excel, want to become better, want to achieve, want to grow. Once you come in, you can't sleep. The fever catches on. I've been to many places in Nigeria, Africa, and the world. I never feel this energy anywhere. It doesn't matter where it is. I've tried to spend a week in New York or London to see if I can catch the fever. It worked a bit, but it was too nice. It was a bit too artificial for me. "No, I'm back to Lagos again." That's the feeling of Lagos. No wonder the first West African Art Fair Art X Lagos was held in Lagos 7 years ago, and it's been growing bigger every subsequent year.

You could live on ideas in Lagos Nigeria, especially in the arts and creative industries. Stand-up comedy erupted all over the world, but in Africa, it erupted here, and then everyone is doing it. Nollywood, the same thing. Everybody is doing a movie, music same thing all over. They are doing it. It came from Lagos here. It became a wildfire. Go to the auctions, go to the fairs. You will see it's just too much. We should look at it, try to hone it, and make a beautiful thing out of it. It's already happening. It will get better over the years.

Is there a supportive environment between the artists of Nigeria? What do you think of the younger generation of artists in Nigeria?

Yes, we have organizations. We have a few art organizations that bring artists together. Artists in Nigeria often exhibit together. We also hang out. If you come during the ART X, you see a lot of pop-up hangouts, and artists are making everywhere go red with fire. And so, yeah, it's like every relationship; although creative people are a bit inward, you can find it when we have public events. Otherwise, everybody's locked up in their studio and hitting the magic from there.

What do I think about the younger generation in Nigeria? These guys will go places. They understand the past. They have seen the future even before they became artists. And so, they are merging it for the present. That is mind-blowing. Digital life has taken life ahead of time. And so, all you need is a press of a button. And so, the younger Nigerian artists are taking full advantage. You can imagine the things I see them

produce. I am overwhelmed. And coming from an artist who has done this for a few years. I am sure that these people will topple the world.

I heard that you organize a prize for younger artists. Can you tell us a bit more about that and why it's important for you to encourage?

Encouraging the new generation is dear to my heart because of my upbringing as an artist. I wasn't really encouraged, and maybe I could have been different. But I also thought it's good to flow in the language of the universe. The universe gives. And also, most importantly, to encourage people because the prize is for artists who excel in their final year at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. I don't take part in the voting; the school takes care of it. They choose the one person who they say is the best of the best from their point of view. I give them a certain monetary prize, but I also bring them to Lagos, and they exhibit in my studio for a week. When I graduated, nobody took me anywhere. I didn't know where to go to. I didn't even know what it meant to just go. I mean, it was bleak. My lecturers saw it fit to give me a first-class, meaning I was, in theory, good enough. Now, that was good enough. I had nowhere to go because nobody showed me. So, if somebody was good enough and these people agreed, why not give them a little push? That's a little push. I do a little monetary prize so you can kick start your career and then show you Lagos because that's where everybody is coming to. And, you know, a lot of people can come. You don't pay anything. We use the studio and do something small and invite people to see your works. They buy, or they don't buy. It doesn't matter. You have come to Lagos. You have a little money to buy colours. That's really good. You take it from there.

What do you think about the contemporary art market in Nigeria and the culture of collecting in Nigeria?

I've lived here for a long time, and people are buying our work, encouraging it. And now there is a new contemporary art clientele base. People are beginning to understand that art is important. It plays a much bigger role than just the aesthetic value. Younger people even want to identify with ideas that only art can describe. Is it getting wider? Yes. Is it working? Yes. But, you know, it's like everything in life. There's a moment here and there, but the most important thing is that people understand that art is now part of our lives. The rotation is better. Now people who live here attend exhibitions; whether they buy or not, they come, and then they understand. They ask questions, and they interact with the work. They are beginning to understand that this is part of our life. This is what we should do; this is who we are. And so, the orientation is really high, and the clientele base is there. I can say that categorically. I live here. I've worked here all my life. Been sustained by this country every day. Are there other clients from all over the world? Yes, but it has always come from here. They saw the works here. They started from here. And so, it's sustainable. At some point, can it be better? Oh, yes. But don't worry, it will be. It's just a matter of time.

Does the Nigerian government aid the development of artists and culture?

The Nigerian government. What do they do about art? I have to be a patriotic citizen. Or what do you think? But you see, we have to be factual. Is it enough? No. No, art requires patronage, not in terms of buying, but in terms of support. Because some ideas can stay locked forever if nobody pushes them out. Especially if whoever has the idea does not have the means to push it out. The galleries are doing their best. The government is stepping in here and there. It's so minute. I would even talk about the organizations; they should also come in a bit more because all over the world, private firms support art a lot, which helps us move forward. When I started in Nigeria, in Lagos, seventeen years ago, around that period, I knew only one organization that supported art. And I was a beneficiary of that competition. There were no grants. There were no funds. The awareness is being created now. I hope for them to understand that our culture is who we are. Our language is what separates us from the other. Our personality can be sold. And they should support it so that, like all over the world, individuals don't run art. Public organizations and the government need to support. That's the only way it can be sustained, you know, without watering it down. Sometimes it tends to be watered down if there's no support.

What has been a difficult experience or period that you experienced as an artist? And did that work itself into your outputs?

It was the beginning of my journey because, at that point, nobody thought I should do art or that something was born in my spirit. If I didn't do it, I was going to die. And then people were saying, "If you do it, you will die inside of me." I knew that if I didn't do it, I would die. That's the greatest challenge I've had as an artist. The rest has been a journey. And journeys are supposed to be here and there, up and down, left and right. The most difficult times as an artist, not from art itself, were when I faced these near-death situations. When I ask myself, "Are you sure you can continue? Are you sure this art isn't going to stop now? Your life is about to." You know those questions. Do they work themselves into my art? Yes. That's why I understand the subconscious and the conscious. That's why I know there's a deep acting plane other than what you see, which enters me. That's why I've works with titles like Out of the Abundance of the Heart. What's abundance in the heart? You don't see it in this office. It's only the heart. So, what erupts from that angle? An artist's journey has its ups, downs, highlights, and lowlights. It doesn't affect you because everything I experience is enjoyable in art. Even when I'm rejected, it is enjoyable. When I'm accepted, it doesn't change much as long as we do art. But in my life as an artist here, these two pots I touched. I think that's all I remember.

And so, in contrary, what has been the highlight of your career?

I've had many beautiful highlights, many firsts. When I first came to Lagos, there was an art competition in 2008 sponsored by the Nigerian Breweries and hosted the African

Artists Foundation and directed By Azu Nwabugo, it was the first edition. I was walking on the streets and just decided to visit the African Artist Foundation office. They said, “You can enter that. Today is the last day of entering the competition.” And I entered, I was part of the winners, and it took me to Amsterdam. That’s a massive highlight! First-ever ART X. First ever in West Africa, and my work was there highlight! First-ever Armory offsite show. I was one of the five exhibiting artists’ highlights! There are so many, but for me, the most important highlights are the people I met along the way. I met a fantastic lady called Sandra Obiagu, owner of SMO gallery, a Nigerian gallerist, who showed my works. Trusted what I was doing, saw the future, and showed it in a solo exhibition. She took me to ART X. Another wonderful person, owner of Gallery 1957, Marwan Zakhem, saw the work. When they see the work, they want to see the person. And then we begin to interact. These are wonderful people. Marwan takes the work to Ghana and to Turkey. And then Kristin, CEO of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery sees the works, and she moves it to London. And so, I’m looking at this journey. But it is actually the people who made the magic and today, I can say that Kristin is one of the most amazing people I’ve ever met, I think she’s an angel. And without trying to be emotional, angels exist. I’m a believer in so many things. Angels exist because when someone trusts you even when you’re not at your best, the person is seeing much more than you know. Kristin showed me that it is possible. So, the people that I met, these are the highlights for me.

The Armory Offsite Show was a miracle, and the experience was overwhelming. You don’t know what it feels like to hear that they are looking for five artists from all over the world, and you are one of them. I hadn’t dreamt of that. And my dream about such a thing was supposed to happen ten years from now. There are so many great artists, so many. And that’s why I talk about people. Time and chance happen to us all. What was the experience like? Overwhelming at first. The stage was unusual. US Open and art. Tennis also is an art. Sometimes it’s not strength that wins it. You have to understand the game and know what to do. But it was an honour and a rare privilege for art and tennis, two things that don’t seem like they want to come together in any way to become something beautiful. The Billie Jean King Center erupted because art was standing on the door. After all, it was different from what everybody had been seeing. They used to come to go see the tennis. So, you could see people standing, and before they got into the centre, “What is this?” You have started to teach culture because if I was going to watch football, what am I going to see a sculpture for? Let’s go watch this game. But suddenly, somebody stops us and says, “Did you see this thing before you came in?” It changed the ideas, and when you watch tennis, you probably have not been thinking the same things you’re used to think before. And now I can understand why the World Cup finals is opened with an exuberant creative funfair. It even helps to relax the mind. It helps to set the mood, so we don’t go there fighting a war instead of enjoying the game. But secondly, which is also very important is that the Armory Show did something significant with the US Open. They tried to also hear the voices of the unheard through art. That was the kind of thing. It was the first time that was among the offsite show. But they were trying to highlight the voices of the unheard. Some

people have not been heard. Some communities have not been heard. And so that's why they picked these five different artists from different, unheard voices of the world and say, "Let's come bring it out because the US Open is a massive event. So, let's make these voices speak." And I'm very thankful to the Armory organization, you know, for thinking it that way. Sometimes we need a highlight in order to highlight others. It was a beautiful synergy. And what was the experience? I don't think I slept for two days when I heard that. I was so excited because I never believed it at that time. Am I doing good art? Probably yes. But to that level? Maybe not yet. But if they say yes, why not? So, I'm excited about it. It has opened up new possibilities. Also, I will be having a show in the new Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery that is opening in Miami. And with that solo show, people will have seen these works. They can also be more conversational with the works. So, we continue to move the tradition and the culture on. So yeah, it was a beautiful thing. I'm even getting interested in tennis now.

One of the greatest highlights in my art journey is Dorothy, the woman I am married to. And I'll tell you why. She met me in my first year at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. She knew where I was going and encouraged me. And so, when we're talking about highlights, I don't usually like to look at the arts per se. It is a world of people. More things will happen because it's progressive. I always believe that everything is progressive. Even though sometimes they look not so. When you want to jump, if you want to spring, you go down. Sometimes the downfall may be a spring. This beautiful documentary, the book, it's a dream come true. And I don't take it lightly because it came at the right time in my career. These things are not normal. They happen from the spirit. And so, when the spirits are aligned, that's a highlight. This is a highlight, having this book and this film. Because now people will see you a bit more and then your stories will be told. And even that someone saw it fit to tell it. And we hope we can also highlight people's lives like that. That's really my journey in life. Highlighting people's life while they highlight other people's life. Small question.

This conversation was recorded between Gerald Chukwuma and Sinclair Benintende de Hainault over the course of two days in Lagos, Nigeria in June 2023.

GERALD CHUKWUMA: A TRUE ARTIST

CHIBUNDU ONUZO

Depending on how you look at things, Gerald Chukwuma works with wood, works on wood or works in wood. It's hard to decide on a preposition. Chukwuma says of himself, "I've formed a relationship with wood." For him, wood is not a mere substitute for canvas. Wood is his muse.

Chukwuma's journey as an artist began in South Eastern Nigeria. As a child, he was "just drawn to art," he explained when we spoke over Zoom in June 2023. In particular, he was drawn to street art, signposts and objects he found on the street. He would bring these objects home and arrange them: shells, screws, the flotsam of urban Nigerian life. He would also paint on the walls of his homes, a habit that got him in trouble with his parents. If he had not heard of the term 'art brut,' he was certainly living it.

Formal education drew him away from his earlier instincts. At the University of Nsukka, he trained as a painter and graduated with a first class. It was a far cry from the found objects of his childhood. And yet, Nsukka also opened new artistic possibilities for Chukwuma. What he knew innately as a child, was confirmed by his faculty. Artists could make art out of anything. The art was not in the medium. The art was in the artist.

After graduation, instead of returning to Nsukka to teach painting, Chukwuma switched medium. In his words, he needed something "more interactive" than canvas. He wanted a material with more texture and character. He wanted a material he could work 'in' rather than work 'on.' There was a dynamism and versatility to wood that fascinated him.

When he speaks of wood, Chukwuma speaks as if talking about an old friend. "If you nail wood, it won't complain," he says with admiration of wood's ability to withstand and absorb manipulation. He describes the process of preparing wood for carving as similar to the process of priming a canvas. He must 'make the wood happy,' he says with a chuckle.

And so, what has Chukwuma made out of wood? He works in panels that are seamlessly joined. You can read his works from left to right, or right to left, or up and down, or down and up. If you're feeling particularly adventurous, you can even try reading it diagonally.

His dexterity with colour reveals his painterly roots. His palette has been transferred from canvas to wood. The panels are vibrant but not garish. In one work, pink, red, blue, yellow, green, purple, silver and orange sit together. It is a loud and bold piece. This is not work to sit in the background. Gerald Chukwuma's wood wants to be noticed. It demands to be noticed.

On the panels, there are figures carved into the wood. The figures are not raised and yet they stand out. Sometimes there are outlines of stylised faces. On another work, there is a humanoid figure with a pebble shaped head and an outsized body. What do these figures

40 *Iwa Akwa - Men Become Men*, 2019, mixed media on wood, 188 x 206 cm

mean? They are like hieroglyphs of Chukwuma's imagination. Without a Rosetta stone, they remain mysterious and undecipherable. They give the work a mystical air.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Chukwuma's wood panels is that they don't always look like wood. If you look closely at the work, you can see the detritus of Western consumer brands hammered flat into the organic wood. On one piece, a red, white and blue sphere glints in the corner. It is the Pepsi logo. On another, the red of Budweiser and the green of Heineken coexist peacefully, their competition for market share momentarily paused.

Chukwuma and his studio assistants gather the cans from the beach and incorporate them into his work. The colours of the cans are his raw pigment, his lapis lazuli and his ochre. Aluminium strip by aluminium strip, the wooden panels are transformed from the organic to a bio-metallic hybrid. In Chukwuma's words, the wood is 'translated.' There has been a 'metamorphosis.'

The spiritual words Chukwuma uses to describe his process are not accidental. In our conversation, Chukwuma often makes a distinction between a 'good artist' and a 'true artist.' Good artistry speaks to technique and skill. True artistry speaks of the spirit, of the mysterious and unknowable process of creation. When speaking of the inspiration behind his own work, he says with wonder, 'These things are deeper than what I understand.'

I ask him what effect, if any, his Christian faith has had on his work. He describes his process as the Holy Spirit flowing through him. He explains to me that he doesn't date his pieces because he believes they cannot be pegged to an age or era. Only in decades or even centuries to come will the true meaning of his work be understood. It is a grand claim but Gerald Chukwuma is ambitious for his work. "We're just starting," he says, when he surveys his career so far.

Chukwuma is open to talking about his influences. They are varied and eclectic. He is part of long tradition of African artists working in wood. As he asks wryly, "When did canvas come to Africa?" He explains further of pre-colonial artistry, "Our canvas was rock, wood and metal." He is part of this long tradition but he is not bound by it, as seen by his incorporation of twenty-first century found objects into his work.

Other obvious influences are El Anatsui, who he describes as 'an oracle,' and Bruce Onobrakpeya, whose experimentation with foil inspired the investigation of metal in Chukwuma's work. Beyond West Africa, the light and dark of Rembrandt's work seeped into a Chukwuma series and Klimt also proved instrumental. "When I saw Gustav Klimt's work, the gold in my work woke up," Chukwuma says with excitement. For him, it all goes back to the distinction between the good artist and the true artist. For the true artist, there is no anxiety around influence. Instead, the true artist, is "directed by everything [they] see."

Chukwuma is forthright in speaking about the financial implications of making work in wood. Wood is heavy and unlike canvas, cannot be rolled into a light tube. It costs millions of Naira to transport his work to shows outside Nigeria. A few years ago, he was offered a show in Asia but had to decline, due to the great expense involved in shipping the pieces. He muses that artists must be more financially savvy about their work. Speaking of the local art scene in Lagos, he notes with humour that the sellers of art often live in the best parts of the city, while the artists live in remote, less salubrious areas.

Chukwuma himself has a studio in Lekki, one of the most expensive neighbourhoods in Lagos. It is a deliberate choice. He has remained true to his art, refusing to change to a medium that is more easily exportable to a foreign market, where the highest concentration of wealthy collectors are. Nevertheless, he is financially savvy enough to be able to afford his up-market studio. There is a pleasing irony in the fact that Chukwuma has taken literal trash (in the aluminium cans) and metamorphosed it into gold.

I ask Chukwuma about the environmental implications of working with all this wood. Deforestation is a pressing issue in Nigeria, causing storms and flash flooding that grow more devastating each year. He sources his planks at a timber market but is aware of the need to replenish his sources of wood. Every year, he and his team plant trees in Eastern Nigeria.

Lastly, I ask about his family. Chukwuma is married with three children and he is an avowed family man. He declares, “If art is disrupting my family, I will stop it.” He lists his priorities as his Maker, his family and his art. Fortunately, he seems to be balancing the three. He tells me he signs his work ‘GDY’ and explains this is an amalgamation of he and his wife’s names: Gerald and Dorothy.

What’s next for Gerald Chukwuma? I don’t know, but I want to see it. He’s developing a new series using plastic recharge cards. He’s returned to working on canvas. He jokes that if he quit art tomorrow, he’d take up cooking and his dishes would become art because the art is in the artist, not the medium. Whatever is next for him, there’ll be people like me on hand, trying to explain his work because he certainly won’t be dishing out easy explanations. In his own view, “If you can explain what you’re doing, you’re a good artist not a true artist.”

Chibundu Onuzo (PhD) is the author of Sankofa, Welcome to Lagos, and The Spider King’s Daughter. She also co-produced and co-wrote the short film ‘Dolapo is Fine,’ which was longlisted for a BAFTA. You can listen to her music, including her single ‘Good Soil’, on Spotify, Apple Music and Youtube.

ORISIRISI: THROUGH THE ENCHANTING JUNGLE OF GERALD CHUKWUMA'S LIFE AND ART

IKENGA CHUU KRYDZ IKWUEMESI

Background

Orisirisi is the Yoruba word for *potpourr*i, especially when translated literally. But it can also stand for eclecticism when interrogated from a higher positive standpoint. At that level, it approximates a melting pot of issues, activities, visions, ideas or other characterisations. Looking at Gerald Chukwuma's existential and creative peregrination in the last five decades, there seems to be a sublime sense in which it evokes *orisirisi*, an impossible yet possible and interesting medley of options, interests, and achievements. It is this medley that this essay is concerned with through a critical discussion of his life and art.

Gerald Chukwuma was born in Enugu, eastern Nigeria, in 1973, three years after the end of the Igbo genocide, now christened Nigerian Civil War. Like most children in the years following the war, he did not see the pain and honour of it, however, he surely experienced the challenges of its aftermath as a child growing up in a new and uncertain Nigeria, with parents burdened with the sociopsychology of disaster and defeat. Like most children of Nigeria's working class of those days (and even now), he faced the challenges of daily survival and readily participated in and contributed to the family industry and economy.

Most times, as many middle-class children would do, he helped his mother in her petty business by selling and hawking sundry wares in the afternoon after school. Before westernisation demonised this pattern as child labour or child abuse, it was a significant and positive aspect of the micro-economy in much of Africa; its contribution to the upbringing of youth in the traditional setting, though controvertible, remains noteworthy. To this extent, the experience must have prepared young Chukwuma for the rough but rewarding terrain he was to walk in the course of his career. Like many such kids, it did not truncate or hinder his success. If anything, it was a steppingstone to future success.

One of the pre- and post-war notions about art was that it was a truancy from life and a passport to poverty. Hence parents did not encourage their wards to take to art. In a society where medicine, law and engineering were ignorantly glorified above other endeavours, potential artists usually faced a grim challenge. Little wonder Chukwuma had no support from his family at the onset of his artistic journey. To make things worse, he had no steady art teacher at Ikenegbu Layout Primary School, Owerri, where he attended between the late 1970s and early 1980s. Of course, this was and is still common with many private and public schools in Nigeria, as art is not considered important. Government's understanding of development and technological advancement is dangerously narrow and does not promote a liberal or holistic education. Thus, in most cases, art teachers who should ignite and mould children's creative instincts are drafted to teach English Language, Government and other subjects. At Federal Government College, Port Harcourt, where he schooled between 1984 and 1989, he had no art lessons throughout.

As it is very obvious that potential artists are lost to parents' poor attitude or lack of art teachers in school, it is remarkable that Chukwuma was able to rise above his situation. Stubbornly swimming against the currents, he had begun early to teach himself drawing and painting by copying from comics and magazines, which he borrowed from his wealthy friends and neighbours, as he could not afford them at the time. While his siblings enjoyed reading the text in the comics and magazines, he was easily fascinated by the images, labouring so much to imitate them in his way. This was the earliest romance Chukwuma was to have with art. As one ready to follow his dream wherever it might lead him, he pursued the passion tenaciously despite his parents' worries about art's capacity to put food on the table. This struggle was not unusual in a society where education was largely valued for its potential as a meal ticket. It was, therefore, only the brave that would go the lonesome road of art. Chukwuma remains an outstanding example.

The Journey towards Art

Chukwuma's practical and determined steps towards art as a career began earnestly in 1989 after his graduation from Federal Government College, Port Harcourt. Three needs propelled him: first, to provide basic needs for himself; second, to continue to contribute to the family economy; and third, to explore art for personal fulfilment and as a means of achieving the first two goals above. After two unsuccessful attempts to gain admission into the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, he applied to study at Federal Polytechnic, Nekede, Imo State, Nigeria. However, it was not art he was gunning for, but Business Administration, largely because he had no formal background in art in his college days. But it was not long before Chukwuma abandoned the course in the middle of his first year at Nekede because he "lost interest".[1] As he told me in a recent conversation, "I left and began to jump from one work to another, and spending most of my time as an unofficial apprentice in as many sign and banner shops as I was allowed to stay in around Owerri town."[2]

Not finding this experience rewarding or fulfilling enough after some trial, he moved to Enugu, the city of his birth, in search of greener pastures. The yearning and craving for art deep down in him must have been stirred once again by the serene streets of Enugu, some of them dotted with alluring but highly abused sculptures and monuments at the roundabouts. Not only that, but he also knew where to go in Enugu to indulge and cultivate the fire of art that burned inside him. Thus, he was easily attracted to the Sculpture Garden and studios of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Institute of Management and Technology (IMT), Enugu. He frequented the garden for instrumental and empathic engagement with the sculptures, and regularly visited the studios to admire and interact with the students as they carried on with their assignments. He also made some useful friends in Enugu and handled a few commercial art commissions there. This was during the regime of General Sani Abacha. Nigeria was getting more uncertain as social conditions became harsher. At this time, what Ali Mazrui described as "counter-penetration"[3] of Europe and America by Africans, including Nigerians, was becoming more and more fashionable. Yet Chukwuma did not embrace this option, either for not finding it attractive or not having the necessary means.

In 1997, Chukwuma got frustrated again and scampered back to Owerri. Nevertheless, he was now convinced that his calling was art and that he had to realise his dream by all means. He decided to return to secondary school to acquire formal knowledge of art and obtain a credit in it in the West African School Certificate examination in early 1998. This marked the real beginning of his journey to University of Nigeria, Nsukka. In October of the same year, he enrolled to study Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, having passed the Joint Matriculations exam earlier in the year.

NSUKKA: Prospects and Influences

On arrival at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Gerald Chukwuma was enchanted by the sculptures around the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, and they remained a major inspirational force for him throughout his time there. It was easy to notice Chukwuma in his first year at Nsukka because he stood out as one of the very few mature-looking students in his class. He was tall, dark-complexioned, handsome, agile, officious and ready to learn. Having just returned to Nsukka after about a 32-month absence, after being sacked by agents of the military junta over the university's national strike of 1996,[4] I was young, active and adventurous. After seeing Chukwuma dash here and there around the department, I engaged him in a light conversation on one occasion. That encounter subsequently encouraged him to work closely with me during much of his time at Nsukka. He had a very fertile mind, which was to be shaped by the Nsukka art and environment and cultivated by his highly imaginative teachers, including Chike Aniakor, Chijioke Onuora, El Anatsui and myself. It was probably at Nsukka that his highly fructifying *orisirisi* spirit germinated, as he was able to nibble at, and absorb, many experiences which would set him on the path to high achievement. Although Chijioke Onuora taught him only drawing, he picked up quite some influence from him, considering that Onoura, a sculptor, was also practising painting and textile design and had a thriving studio in town where students converged to learn and interact as they assisted him with work. Chukwuma was a regular visitor at Onuora's Tuff Studio in Nsukka and he learned a lot there. Also, in the Sculpture Section of the department, there was the great El Anatsui, whom Chukwuma admired immensely and whose work had a tremendous impact on him, largely for Anatsui's commitment to creative adventure and experimentation. As Chukwuma told me, "At Nsukka we met El Anatsui, who we did not even know was world-class until we got into that school and found out…He showed me and all us then that you can be right there at University of Nigeria, Nsukka and draw the world to you; that nothing was impossible if you follow your heart."[5] These are very revealing words and seem to explain Chukwuma's recourse to and exploration of the pyrographic technique – the style that first brought Anatsui to limelight – in much of his work.

To believe that "nothing was impossible" also echoes the spirit of "natural synthesis," which was born in Zaria with the Zaria Art Society and subsequently followed one of the members of the society, Uche Okeke, to Nsukka in the early 1970s.[6] Natural synthesis was not only about the hybridity of indigenous and extraneous visions of local and foreign ideas, but the understanding of the possibilities open to the human spirit when it is

unfettered in its imagination and reach. Although Chukwuma did not meet Uche Okeke directly by the time he arrived Nsukka in 1998, he met him indirectly through some of his (Okeke's) associates and colleagues, including El Anatsui and Chike Aniakor, who were still teaching at Nsukka at that time.[7] While Aniakor had a background in Zaria where he trained, Anatsui was a product of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, and was wooed by Uche Okeke to take up a teaching position at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1975, when the Ghanaian economy was beginning to spiral downwards.[8] But both shared in the positive experimentation that underpinned natural synthesis. Although Anatsui naturally influenced Chukwuma as any art colossus would a young admirer who was a burgeoning artist, Chike Aniakor and I taught him painting directly. Aniakor had also been my teacher and I can understand why Chukwuma remembers him with a sense of pride and nostalgia. A charismatic artist, writer, and speaker, Aniakor had a subtle and easy way of inspiring his students profoundly. Chukwuma remembers him for some unusual and insightful words he often said to him: "Listen, there are no two colours that work; every colour can meet any colour and still be beautiful; there are no colours that must stick or work together."[9]

These were the combination of influences that helped wean Chukwuma from convention and opened his eyes to possibilities he could explore. On one occasion, he ran to me with a photograph of a small installation he had seen in an exhibition and asked worriedly, "But is this art?" I took a quick look and told him calmly, "Who knows, you may find yourself doing things like that in the future." I cannot say that he was quick to be "born again" stylistically, but he had gotten bolder and more experimental by the time he graduated.

Looking closely at his performance in the studio and classroom at Nsukka, I should say that he was not one of the bookish students in his class. But he was certainly one of our outstanding pupils in his time. It was clear that he was practice-oriented and very good in marrying his imagination and skills. His class was a very competitive one with a good number of bright students who were generally eager to learn and experiment with new ideas, forms, and techniques. Although he was not personally keen on writing, some of his classmates were very promising writers and poets, which obviously heightened the healthy competition. Whatever he missed in not having a flair for writing, he made up with his keen sense of observation and ability to communicate with and endear himself to people.

In his final year in the department, he became one of the executives of the Association of Fine and Applied Arts Students (AFAAS), the departmental students' association. But his apparent ubiquity and connection to both students and staff made him seem more influential than the association's president, Ifeanyi Agbo. This influence and his popularity in the department earned him the nickname "Abacha", a rather positive allusion to the pervasive power and memory of Nigerian's late fire-eating military dictator and kakistocrat, General Sani Abacha.

Chukwuma is convinced that I was a major influence during his days at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. I am not very sure of that. But it is important to dwell briefly on my interaction and relationship with him, which he seems to cherish till this day. When I met him as a first-year student in the university, I was concluding my MFA course in the department as a graduate assistant; he helped me with logistics, printing of the project report, mounting of the degree exhibition, and other matters. Subsequently, he occasionally spent time at my home in Enugu as a student, friend and unofficial assistant. He told me in a recent conversation: "I was even influenced by the way you paint…Those fiery yellows and orange…I spent some time in your house watching you do this and that was inspiring." Beyond sharing ideas, techniques and meals at *Heavensgate* – my little home in Enugu – it is possible that my interaction with Chukwuma helped him to step through the looking glass, in Barbara Cartland's sense of seeing beyond the ordinary.[10] Through my own solo exhibitions and some group exhibitions of The Pan-African Circle of Artists (PACA) and The Visual Orchestra, of which I was founder and secretary, he gained a little insight into the economics and sociology of art. For instance, his first trip to Lagos and Abuja were through errands he graciously ran for me and PACA. In October 2001, we participated together in an exhibition, *Echoes, Cities and Artists in Nigeria,* organised by Emmanuelle Spiesse-Fourchard at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. For him as a student, it was a major outing, especially as it was an opportunity for him to show and interact with professional artists. Added to these were regular activities – poetry reading, lectures, roundtables, and exhibitions, among others – I organised in collaboration with The Art Republic (of which I was Emeritus President) at the Alliance Française, Enugu, between 2002 and the time he graduated in 2003. There, he met a number of artists, both seasoned and young, and scholars such as Okay Ikenegbu, Ayo Adewunmi, Peter-Jazzy Ezeh, Okechukwu Nwafor, Smooth Nzewi, and many others. This provided him with the extra-curricular experience he needed to fly. It was not surprising that he graduated with first class at the end of his study at Nsukka in 2003 to the admiration of many and in fulfilment of a solemn promise he had made to himself at the point of entry in 1998. For I was told by another painting student who knew him from Owerri that he had openly declared in his first year that his goal at the University of Nigeria was to graduate in first class in Fine and Applied Arts. At this juncture, one may wonder whether and how his first-class degree contributed to his success as an artist or whether it was an extraordinary perfume he wore as he strove for achievement. Either way, there is no doubt that it provided him some leverage in the immediate post-Nsukka years.

After Nsukka

After graduating from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 2003, Chukwuma moved to Abuja in search of his life's compass. For a whole year, he oscillated between art-making and printing while also making new contacts. But he could tell that things were not really going the way he had hoped. On the advice of some colleagues, he packed up and moved to Lagos, the acclaimed art vortex of Nigeria. In Lagos, he rented a two-bedroom flat and converted one of the rooms to a studio. There he could practice his art the best possible way he could.

Initially, he mainly engaged in printing and other commercial arts to ensure his daily bread. On one particular day, when he went to print a job for one of his clients, he ran into someone printing invitation cards for an upcoming exhibition. When he told the man that he was an artist and would like to know more about the exhibition, he advised him to find one Mr (now Dr) Jess Castellote to see if he could co-opt him for the exhibition. When he found Castellote a few days later at the Lagos Business School, Castellote was fascinated with Gerald's work and readily accepted him for the exhibition, which was later held at Pan-African University (now Pan-Atlantic University), Lekki, Lagos, in 2008. It was his first major exhibition. Although it did not change his fortune, it was a big leap in the right direction. Another giant stride would be the exhibition he was part of in Holland in 2008 under the auspices of the African Artists Foundation and Nigeria Breweries, Lagos. But it seems the big boon was to be his exhibition with SMO Gallery in 2016 and another one in 2017 as part of the maiden ART-X in Lagos, which opened the door to a major solo exhibition at Gallery 1957, Ghana, in 2018, followed by another solo at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in 2019, and participation in 1-54 Art Fair in London under the auspices of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery also in 2019. For all these shows, there were serious bodies of works produced by the artist. In between, he also produced exotic wooden furniture for individuals and corporate bodies. In both the furniture and artworks, one could see the *orisirisi* spirit – that eclectic philosophy he imbibed at Nsukka – at work, not just in the fact that he practised across art modes, but also for the reason that his works, whether painting, sculpture or furniture, are a melting pot of ideas, visions, motifs and designs. This is a testimony to his multiple parentages that goes back to Nsukka and his ability to draw from such rich heritage in response to the challenges of practising art in Nigeria. Chukwuma's art and furniture production offers another prism to comment on his exploitation of the natural synthesis philosophy that comes from his Nsukka experience. Although his art and furniture harbour different modes of aesthetics respectively, they share an influence from indigenous design principles and motifs, ethno-symbolism and vernacular aesthetics as they vividly reaffirm that art is at once a universal and multiversal phenomenon. Before taking a closer look at Chukwuma's art, it is necessary to briefly discuss his furniture design to see how it complements the art and vice versa.

He noted that his foray into furniture was born out of a personal need. He could not afford furniture for a while after renting a new house in Lagos, so he decided to build a set of furniture for his sitting room. When a collector visited him sometime 2007 in his home and saw the furniture, she was so excited that she commissioned a stool. This imbued Chukwuma with the needed confidence to explore furniture making. Because the style of the furniture blends function and aesthetic qualities, it does not seem to encroach on his art making. In fact, it can easily be said that the furniture is as artistic as the art, in spite of its functional inclination.

The power and charm of the furniture lie in their form and design as their function are simply the same as those of similar objects anywhere. It is thus from this form and design that the aesthetic tendencies flow. Within the highly tactile surface of the pieces are embedded and incised myriad forms and motifs that connect with the artist's culture,

 1. & 2. Gerald Chukwuma, furniture production in studio. 3. Gerald Chukwuma, cabinet

heritage and experience. Each piece is thus a tapestry of visions and images woven with colours, lines and textures. In figs. 1 and 2, scenes from the studio show the furniture development process. The processes rely on the exploration of the imagination in an attempt to rise above the commonplace and the banal. The shapes are carefully thought out and realised with the use of wood and malleable sheets of plywood. Thus, in a sense, the outcome, as in figs. 3 and 4 are sculptural both in shape and surface design. To this extent, they evoke in a different but related sense, the hybridity that underpins his paintings. And what emerges in the contested space between form and function is a dilemma in naming or categorisation. Are they functional sculpture or do we call them sculptural furniture? For the artist, this is not important so long as the works provide a channel of expression for the multifaceted creative urge that sits deep in his restless mind. The same dilemma of categorisation is also present in Chukwuma's artworks. They are not easy to categorise. If we say that they share in the pyrographic tendency that trended in the Nsukka School[11] over many years as an influence from El Anatsui, Chukwuma's technique is more of an exaggerated form of engraving, in light of the fact that he does not burn the woods, although he tried that in some of his early works in Lagos. Even in some of his works where the pyrographic technique or effect seems likely, it is not significant enough to influence their categorisation, as in figs 5 and 6.

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Beyond pyrography and engraving, Chukwuma's works are a playground of fancy, forms, materials and colour. Aluminium and copper sheets, nails, and sundry tactile found objects operate in unison to create the power and astonishment that exude from the works as can be seen in figs. 7 - 9 and many other works like a marketplace where various forms and forces commingle; they are like a dream, a fantasyland where anything is possible. They have the tendency to overwhelm the viewer in a positive way, both for their scale and form; the viewer is aware that he/she is held captive empathically by these works, but it is not easy to leave as the eyes travel around the colourful landscape in search of meaning and, perhaps, happiness.

Technically and formally, Chukwuma's works defy classification. Like his functional art, the sculpture-paintings gesture "a little to the right, a little to the left," to borrow the words of Ibrahim Babangida.[12] They are neither painting nor sculpture but a cross of both (see figs. 10-12). For the artist, this is not very important so long as he is able to make a difference and interrogate the contours of our notion of art. "There is no sculptor, no painter, no ceramist," he said, "they all create something from the heart that impact people in the same way. So, I am neither a sculptor nor a painter. But my engagement with sculpture and painting adds to my experience to make me a better artist."[13] For him, that striving to become a better artist has become a pervasive aim in his trajectory. From his graduation in 2003 through his sojourn in Abuja and his coming to Lagos, the pursuit of

 4. Gerald Chukwuma, cabinet

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5. *Big Fish*, 2007, wood and acrylic, 165 x 227 cm
6. *The Spirit Bird*, 2015, wood and acrylic, 152 x 183 cm

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7. *Phases*, 2016, wood, aluminium sheet and acrylic, 102 x 165 cm
8. *Wetin Dey Happen*, 2016, wood, aluminium sheet, acrylic, 122 x 196 cm

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9. *The King and His Subjects*, 2017, wood, aluminium sheet and acrylic, 119 x 229 cm
10. *Comb*, 2006, wood, aluminium sheet and acrylic, 183 x 208 cm

professional success has been at the centre of his practice and the artworks themselves. Looking at the works he showed in some of the major exhibitions he has held since 2008, it is clear that he agrees with his teacher, Professor Chike Aniakor, that creativity is the ability of the mind to wander from one level of experience to another. Each body of works extends his experimental interests but shows a deeper fermentation of his mind, vision and imagination. And this maturity did not just happen. As each outing came with new set of commitments, connections and exposure, the artist logically processed and cultivated them in his very fertile mind in very fructifying ways. If his encounter with Azu Nwagbogu and Sandra Obiago brought him to the limelight, his sorties in Ghana and London have put him on the international stage and he continues to bring to that stage works that celebrate his Igbo heritage and African experience. Like some of his teachers, he seems to understand the import of a "*glocal*"[14] attitude to a highly westernizing, if globalizing, world, especially for the formerly colonized.

We can say that Chukwuma's current style started as early as 2006. Although he was glaringly introducing colour at this time, it was a bit tentative and he seems to be still playing with some pyrography here as seen in his *Comb* (fig.10). However, between this work and others produced in 2007 to about 2012, there seems to be a back-and-forth movement in the evolution of colour. For instance, in *Nkwo, Eke, Orie, Ofor 1* (fig.11), *Countenance* (fig.12), *I Know Where the Sun Lives* (fig.13) and *What Goes Around* (fig.14) all produced between 2008 and 2011, there is a noticeable restraint on colour. But in *Free* (fig.15), *Chop* (fig.16), and *Three Dimensions* (fig.17), colour was boldly coming back and actually took a front seat from 2015 onwards. It was also around this time that he did much of the *Rechargecards Series* (figs.18-20). Even some of his works that are clearly sculptural in form also seem to raise discursive issues through the deployment of colour, not only as a reflection of the painter in the artist, but also as a means of stretching the evocative and discursive capacities of the works. Mostly, Chukwuma's works look like aerial impressions of strange, even surreal, landscapes around which the eyes can travel. They are largely abstract in their formal outlook. Even when recognizable forms such as human figures are featured (figs. 21-22), the aim is not really "recognition"; the forms are primarily deployed as deconstructed designs and motifs that enhance aesthetics and meaning.

It can easily be said that between 2008 and 2023, Chukwuma's work has transformed and metamorphosed in form, technique and style without losing its centralising essence. Even in some of his works where he experiments with acrylics and ink on canvas and paper (fig.23-24), he has refused to be caged into conventional pigeonholes which may delimit his creative freedom. Although he has relied mainly on spontaneity in ideating and creating his art, his style and technique seem to celebrate his process as a road map to form and content.

11. *Nkwo, Eke, Orie, Afor 1*, 2009, wood and acrylic, 51 x 155 cm
12. *Countenance 1, 2 & 3*, 2009, wood and acrylic, 63 x 122 cm each
13. *I Know Where the Sun Lives*, 2010, wood and acrylic, 137 x 208 cm
14. *What Goes Around*, 2011, wood, metal and acrylic, 122 x 132 cm

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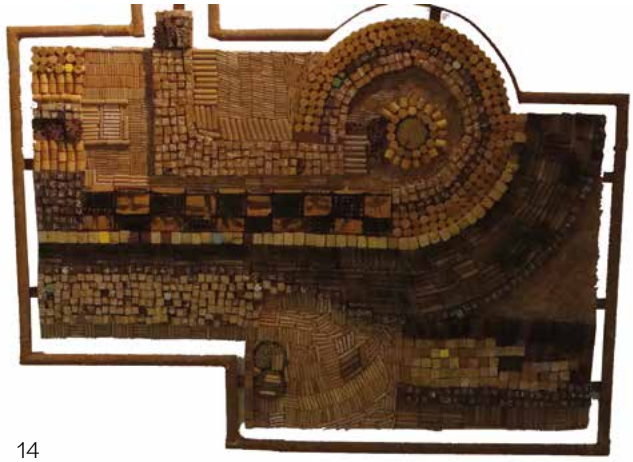

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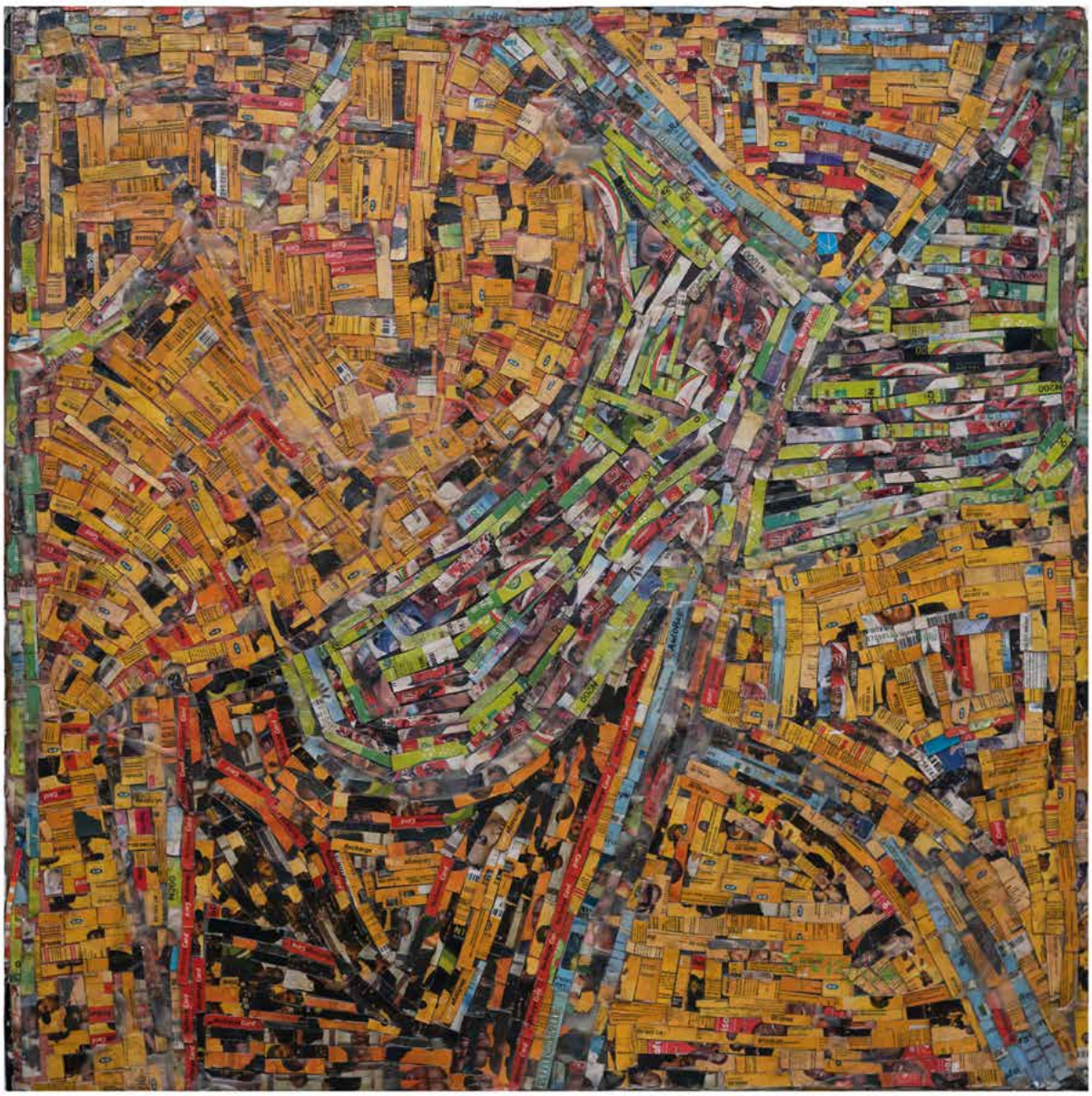
Thematisation and Inspirational Sources

In terms of his themes, Chukwuma has been somewhat broadminded, in the sense that he draws inspiration from sundry issues and phenomena. He is inspired by his personal experiences and his environment. In his words:

> We all come from the same source, and I try to get inspired by what is happening around me, but I also often want to create solutions instead of dwelling on the happenings, and so while I want to talk about the happenings in our immediate society in Nigeria, Africa, what happened in the past, what happens in the future, I try to see how my work can either solve or heal, or magnify everything I want to talk about. And so, since my work for me is a place where everything is possible, I can create any future that I want on my pictorial ground and so, whatever my vision is, I want to create a better reality, because I have the ability to do so as an artist...[15]

Thus, going by his words and works, he is very liberal in his themes and subject matter. He prefers to relate with the positive essence of things and sees his art like a healing balm, a concrete means to catharsis. Like much visual arts, his works approximate poetry,

15. *Freedom*, 2012, wood and acrylic, 102 x 157 cm
16. *Chop*, 2015, acrylic and wood, 152 x 213 cm
17. *Three Dimensions*, 2016, wood, aluminium sheet, acrylic, 122 x 206 cm



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18. *Google Maps II*, 2014, Recharge cards collage on board, 76 x 76 cm
19. *Google Maps II*, 2014, Recharge cards collage on board, 76 x 76 cm
20. *Google Maps II*, 2014, Recharge cards collage on board, 76 x 76 cm

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although they do not thrive on economy of creative means as most poetry do. They are boldly and deliberately verbose. It is on that verbosity, rather than an economy of means, that their enormity of meaning relies.

When Chukwuma argues that he relates with the positive essence of issues and phenomena, he indirectly repudiates the resistance philosophy that characterised much of the art of the Nsukka School in the past. The themes of most of his works testify to this fact, as can be seen in most of the works referred to above. In fact, for one interested in politics and resistance in the history of the Nsukka School, Chukwuma's art is not the best place to look. He does not celebrate politics and the ugly vibes that emanate from it in Nigeria. Rather, he deploys and explores art's salve as a tool for grappling with and containing the perennially harsh social conditions in these parts. Perhaps I should say that he appears apolitical in his thematisation and that his vision and style subvert or problematise poetic standards. He is, for instance, not like Kierkegaard's image of a poet as "An unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so formed that when he sighs and cry pass through them, it sounds like ravishing music."[16] We must also concede that Chukwuma's art shares some affinity with music, in Jean Paul's sense of music as "moonlight in the gloomy night of life."[17] It should be noted, however, that Chukwuma's works harbour a sense of social commitment. He is not a maker of art for art's sake which Chinua Achebe describes as a "deodorised piece of dog shit".[18] This is discernable in many individual works and notably in three works which the artist seems to cherish.

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21. *Moving Ahead*, 2016, wood, aluminium sheet and acrylic, 44 x 58 cm
22. *Chairman*, 2017, wood, aluminium sheet and acrylic, 183 x 305 cm

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Two of the works deal with war and its ugly essence. They are, perhaps, the artist's response to the civil war in Nigeria which ended officially about three years before his birth. If Chukwuma and his family did not feel the dire pinch of the aftermath of the civil war as most Igbo families did in the first decade after the war, he must have, as a responsive and responsible artist, sensed the continuation of that war by the Nigerian state until now through other unconventional means. Little wonder the ghost of Biafra has resurrected in Nigeria in recent times with the Igbo seeking self-assertion and self-determination in a renewed struggle for identity. In a subtle way, there is a connect between the present Igbo identity agitation and what happened in the Fine and Applied Arts Department of University of Nigeria, Nsukka in the early 1970s. For when Biafra surrendered in January 1970 and the University of Nigeria was re-opened for academic business, the art faculty and some students, including Chike Aniakor, Uche Okeke, Chuka Amaefuna, and Obiora Udechukwu pursued an academic and creative agenda which enabled them to reaffirm their Igbo identity through a recourse to Igbo autochthonous painting and sculpture.[19] This strategy has been described rightly or wrongly as a neo-Biafra agenda.[20]

By the time Chukwuma came to Nsukka twenty-nine years after the so-called civil war, most of the pioneers of the Nsukka School had left for one reason or the other. But he could connect with the philosophy, ideology and essences of the Nsukka School through

23. *Bus Stop; Jump and Pass*, 2017, lithograph and acrylic on paper, 107 x 132 cm
24. *I Dance*, 2015, ink on watercolour paper, 56 x 76 cm

25

the instrumentality of history and the work of some of the Nsukka acolytes and apostles he met there. His *WWW.WORLDWITHOUTWAR.COM* (fig.25), now in the collection of Yemisi Shyllon Museum, Lagos, and *Chop* (fig.16) therefore, represent a return to aspects of Nigerian history and an interrogation of the perpetual renewal of history in Nigeria through politics, religion and ethnicity. Of course, the philosophical significations of the works can be extended to the prevailing reality in much of Africa – the world's theatre of the absurd and the impossible, created by the west in the mills of slavery and colonisation. The other work, an installation which Chukwuma seems to be very fond of is *Limbless* (fig. 26), which is inspired by the tragedy of Igbo Landing, the story of the captive Igbo people who had taken over their slave ship and refused to submit to slavery in the United States, but chose to commit mass suicide in May 1803 at Dunbar Creek on St. Simons Island, Glynn County, Georgia.[21] Although some were said to have been recaptured, most took their destiny into their own hands and jumped into the sea, drowning themselves in the most bizarre and stubborn manner. In Igbo cosmology, suicide is not a heroic act; it is an abominable route to the otherworld as it embodies *ajọ ọnwụ* (bad death) which cannot usher the victim into ancestry, a very crucial attainment in Igbo politics of the after-life.[22] If the slaves had committed suicide on Igbo soil before they were put into the slave ship, they would neither been buried nor celebrated as they are today.[23] Although the individual identities of these brave slaves are not known, the significance of their action and death derives from the location and circumstance in which they occurred, and it is further amplified by the evil essence and ugly implications of slavery. This is why Igbo Landing

 25. *WWW.WORLDWITHOUTWAR.COM*, 2016, burnt wood panel, 152 cm diameter

26

remains a positive landmark in Igbo history. Beyond history, it holds a lasting and powerful significance for philosophers and artists and has been explored as a creative resource in various ways. In light of Igbo situation in contemporary Nigeria which approximates slavery and shelter-colonisation in many ways, the Igbo may need to invoke and exploit Igbo Landing's signification philosophically. It is, perhaps, the obvious connection between the enabling circumstance of Igbo Landing and Igbo situation in contemporary Nigeria, most vividly foregrounded by the result and aftermath of Nigeria's 2023 elections, that Chuwkuma's *Limbless* brings to mind. The rugged forms of the figures in the installation solemnly capture the hope, resolve, and stubbornness of those slaves in the midst of hopelessness. At the level of meaning, the work celebrates Igbo characteristic courage and resilience as possible antidotes to the challenges of the present.

Stylistically, Chukwuma is a child of multiple heritage. During his years as a student in Nsukka, he naturally immersed himself in *Ulism*, the centralising philosophy of the Nsukka School for many years, espoused by its pioneers. *Ulism* derives from the profound experimentation and the study of Igbo *uli* body and wall painting tradition by the Nsukka artists in the early 1970s as a reaction to the defeat of Biafra and their own place in a new Nigeria.[24] *Uli*, according to Chuu Krydz Ikwuemesi and Eva Obodo,

> refers at once to different but related things. It is the name of the indigo dye obtained from several species of plants identified with various botanical names and used for

26. *Limbless, Empty Oil Barrel Series*, 2018, barrels and resin, 198 x 305 x 122 cm

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> drawing on the human body. Apart from describing the dye, the word *uli*, also stands for the drawing made on the body or wall with the dye or pigment; and it is also the name of the entire art tradition in which the indigo dye or earth pigments are used. The word *uli* equally functioned as an aesthetic determinant among the Igbo, referring to various nuances of beauty, intricacy and manifestation of design or skill. [25]

As Chuu Krydz Ikweumesi further explains in a recent article in *Utafiti*,

> Experimentation with *uli* as a creative idiom by modern Igbo painters dates back to the late 1950s when Uche Okeke, an art student and a member of the Zaria Art Society, began to explore Igbo culture in his work in a manner commensurate with the stylistic-ideological rebellion of the Zaria Art Society. However it was not until the end of the Nigerian civil war in 1970 that *uli* took a deep root in the art philosophy that dominated the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. This was to be expected since the immediate post-war period in Igbo land was a time when Igbo artists sought to vanquish the pains of loss and defeat through the renewal of self and identity via a 'forward-to-the-past' philosophy.[26]

Although direct interest in *uli* seems to have waned at Nsukka, some students and faculty there still see in it a rich and endless creative resource (fig. 27). Chukwuma was not left out of the *uli* experience while a student at Nsukka. But he is now a long way from home stylistically. There is no doubt that he has picked up other influences such as *nsibidi* and

 27. Nsukka students in a Uli workshop, in Agulu, Anambra State, Nigeria, 2009. Source: Chuu Krydz Ikwuemesi

adinkra in his chequered and fructifying trajectory since graduation as can be seen in his works where experiment and spontaneity are key. He may not be strictly appropriating Igbo *uli* in his work at this time, but he connects to its lyrical symbolism through his profound exploration of the line as a major creative element. After all, as Chike Aniakor has argued, "*Uli* is the line and the line is *uli*."[27] In that sense *uli*, *nsibidi* and *adinkra* all become the multi-verse of the universe of Chukwuma's style. For him, the possibilities of the line are endless, given its pan-cultural essence and ability to define all forms. In other words, the line, as the principal character in his works, imbues them with a universal essence, even when they draw from personal and African experiences.

Igwebuike – a Conclusion

Having run through the jungle of Gerald Chukwuma's life and work in the preceding paragraphs, the question that seems to have been addressed is, how did the son of an obscure immigration worker rise above the challenges of art practice in an (under) developing and kakistocratic environment like Nigeria to attain success and recognition locally and internationally? From the preceding discussion, it is clear that Chukwuma learnt well and has practised professionally. It is simplistic to say that he has worked hard. At 50, he still works hard enough as a man of tremendous energy and unwavering determination. I should say that he fires from many cylinders, always seeking new challenges at the frontiers. Like some of his teachers, he believes that the finest artists are those who can reach their audience through diverse means or media. Thus, he has trained himself to operate like the dancing masquerade which must be appreciated from many sides.

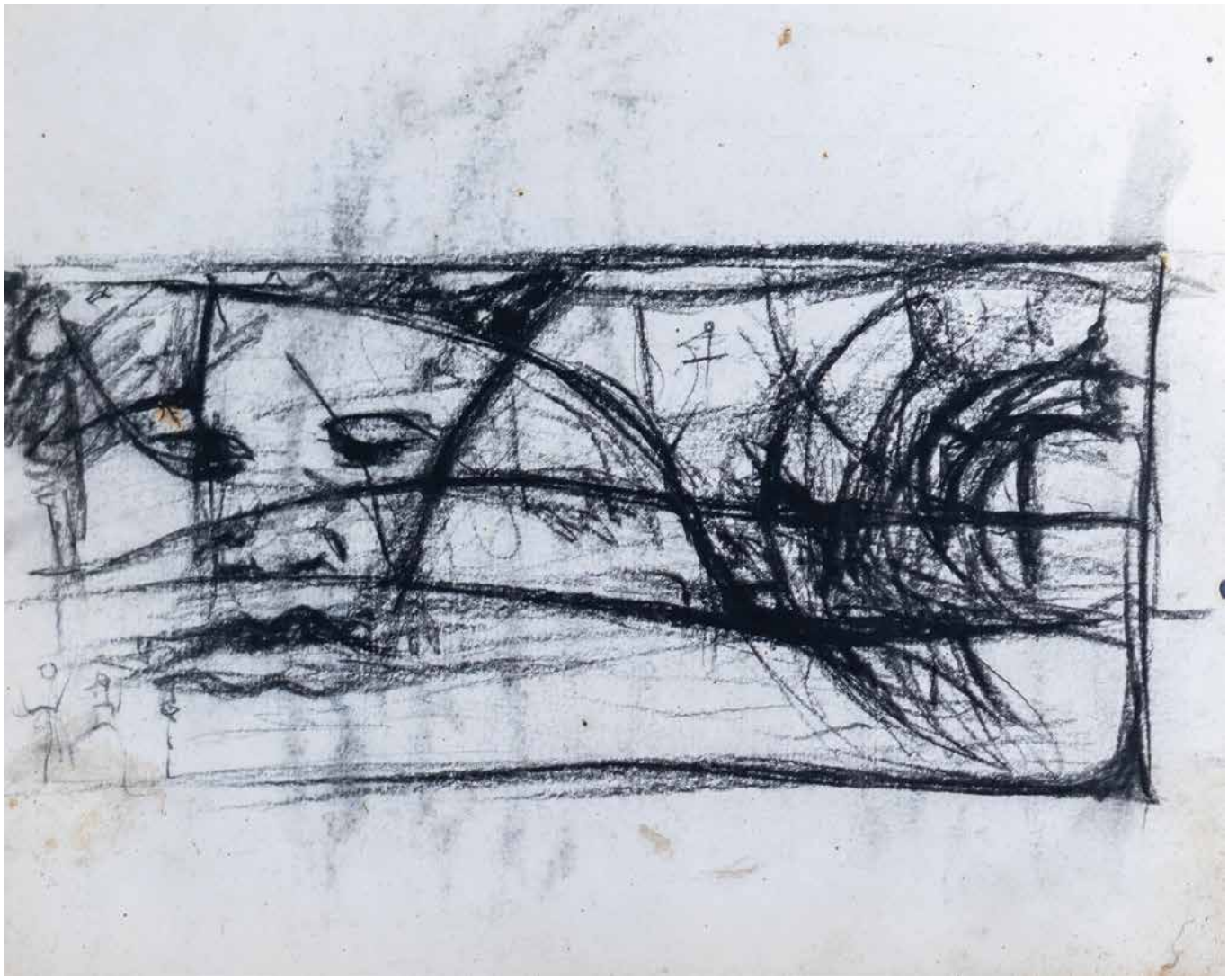
This multiplicity of skill and vision easily resonates with the Igbo adage or name, *Igwebuike*, (many is might). The philosophical essence of *Igwebuike* logically connects with *orisirisi* in a certain sense as it also reflects Chukwuma's eclecticism in the use of multiple panels, an avalanche of arresting lines, and diverse media in his work. *Igwebuike*, thus, points back to the *orisirisi* imagery with which this paper began. The essence of those two vernacular words not only helps in appreciating and understanding the life and art of Gerald Chukwuma, but also reflects his Renaissance spirit, that is, the ability to understand oneself and the world and also to deploy the consciousness to the triumph of the human spirit through the creative enterprise.

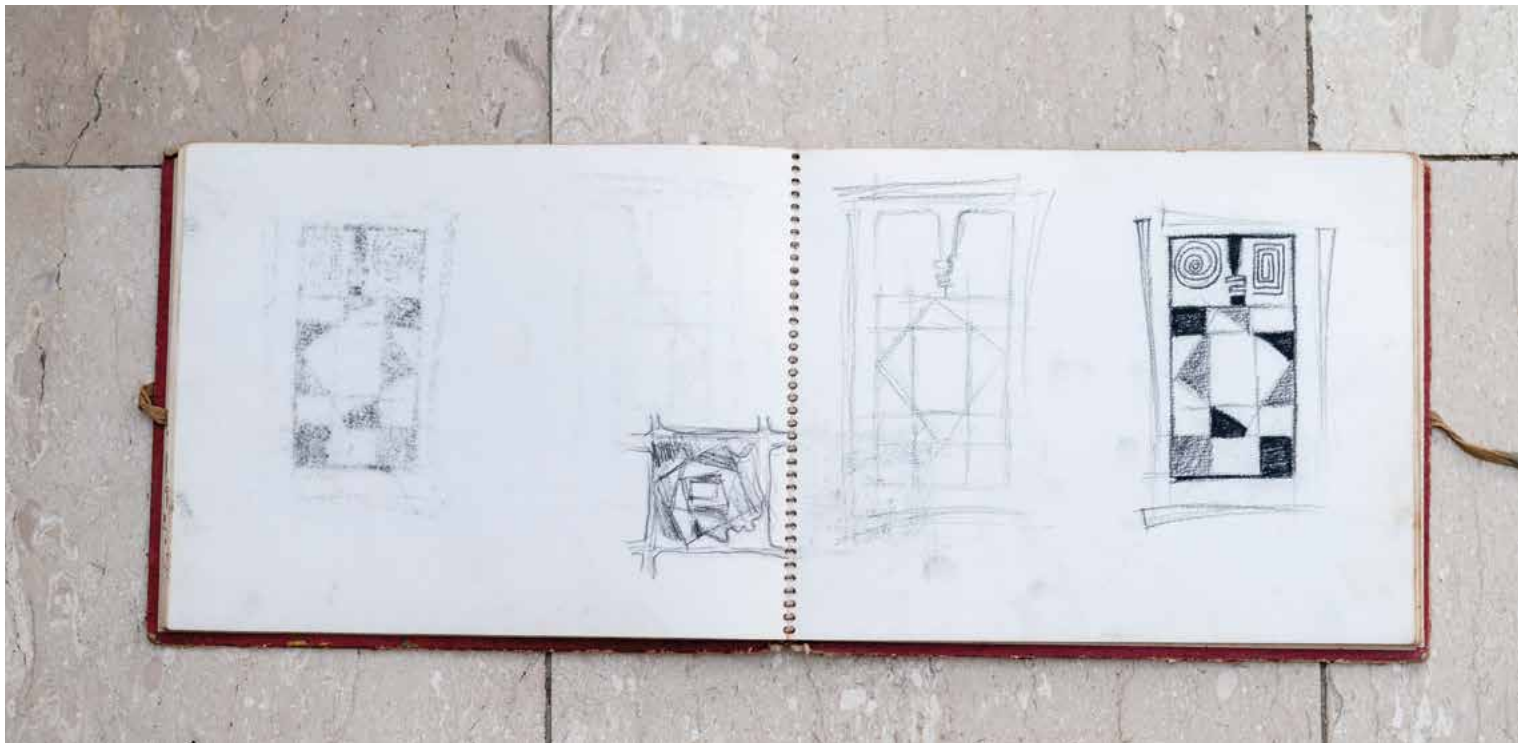
End Notes

1. Conversation with Gerald Chukwuma, artist, Lagos, May 9, 2023.
2. Ibid.
3. Ali Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. (Toronto: The Little, Brown and Company (Canada) Limited, 1985), p. 239.
4. C. Ikwuemesi, (2018). "Excerpt and Artwork | A Romance with Vultures". *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 41(1). http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/F7411042308 Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/29m2d2hj

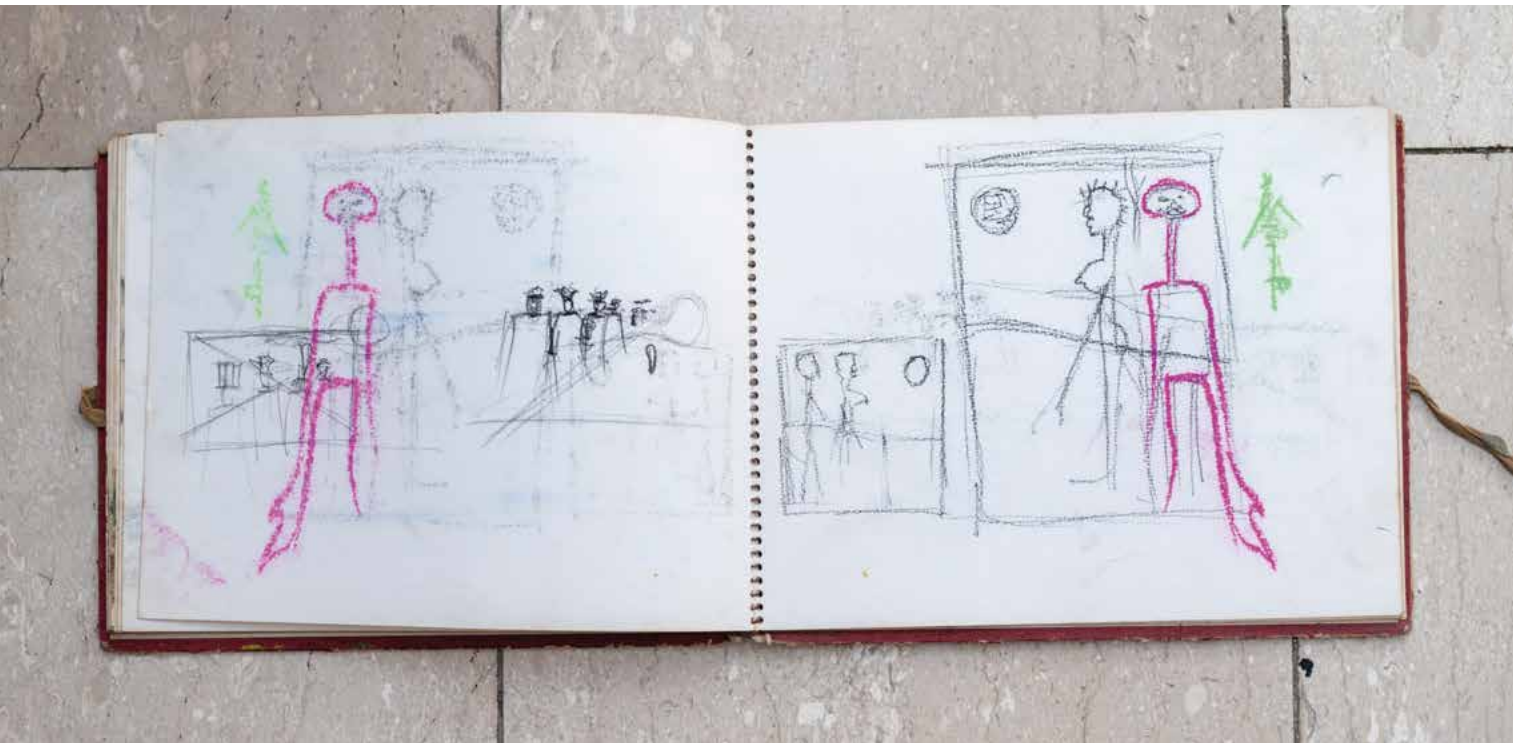
5. Conversation with Gerald Chukwuma, artist, Lagos, May 9, 2023.
6. Ola Oloidi (2018). "Uche Okeke's Radicalization of Modern Nigerian Art", 1958 – 1986. *The Artfield*, no 2, December 2019, pp. 4-24.
7. In 2003, the year of Gerald Chukwuma's graduation, I also organised a series of activities and publications in Nimo and Lagos to commemorate Uche Okeke's 70th birthday. Chukwuma and some of his classmates worked as assistants and also joined me on visits to Asele Institute in Nimo, Anambra State to interview Uche Okeke. See for instance *The Triumph of a Vision: an Anthology on Uche Okeke and Modern Art in Nigeria:* Lagos Pendulum Art Gallery; C. Krydz Ikwuemesi (ed.) (2003). *The Triumph of Asele, the Works of Uche Okeke* (Ex. Cat). Lagos: Pendulum Art Gallery.
8. Odoja Asogwa (2022). "Early Development History of the Nsukka Art Department, 1961-1980". *The Artfield*, no 5, December 2022,pp. 12-38.
9. Conversation with Gerald Chukwuma, artist, Lagos, May 9, 2023.
10. Barbara Cartland, *I seek the Miraculous* (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), pp. 84-85.
11. Chijioke Onuora (2012). *Two Decades of Pyrography by Nsukka Artists*, 1986 - 2007 (Ph.D Thesis, University of Nigeria, Nsukka).
12. This phrase was used by General Babangida to describe the two political parties his government formed in the 1990s in the course of his protracted and ill-fated transition programme in Nigeria. It was later to be used by people to describe different things in various contexts.
13. Conversation with Gerald Chukwuma, artist, Lagos, May 9, 2023.
14. 'Glocalization' is used here as another term for hybridization, which Uche Okeke's notion of 'natural synthesis' also embodied.
15. Conversation with Gerald Chukwuma, artist, Lagos, May 9, 2023.
16. Soren Kierkegaard Quotes. BrainyQuote.com, BrainyMedia Inc, 2023. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/soren_kierkegaard_401477, accessed June 15, 2023.
17. Jean Paul Quotes. BrainyQuote.com, BrainyMedia Inc, 2023. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/jean_paul_106876, accessed June 15, 2023.
18. Chinua Achebe.1975. *Morning yet on Creation Day*. Michigan: Heinemann Educational.
19. C. K. Ikwuemesi, (2020). "Problems and Prospects of Uli Art Idiom and the Igbo Heritage Crisis", *Utafiti*, 14 (2), 171-201. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/26836408-14010011.
20. Chuu Krydz Ikwuemesi 2022. "Uche Okeke and the Nsukka School: A Long Way from Home". A paper presented at the Pioneers in African Art Conference, Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris, April 10-13.
21. See Njideka Agbo (2019). "A Brief Hiastory of Igbo Landing", *The Guardian*, March 6.
22. Chukwuezugo Krydz Ikwuemesi (2021) "Celebrating tragedy: dying, death and mortuary arts among the Igbo", *Mortality*, DOI: 10.1080/13576275.2021.1884057
23. Ibid.
24. Ikwuemesi, 2020.
25. Chuu Krydz Ikwuemesi & Evaristus Obodo (2021) "Primitives or Classicists? A Critical Look at the Work of Uli Women Painters of Nri", *Critical Arts*, DOI: 10.1080/02560046.2021.1883080.
26. Ikwuemesi, 2020.
27. Ibid.

WORKS





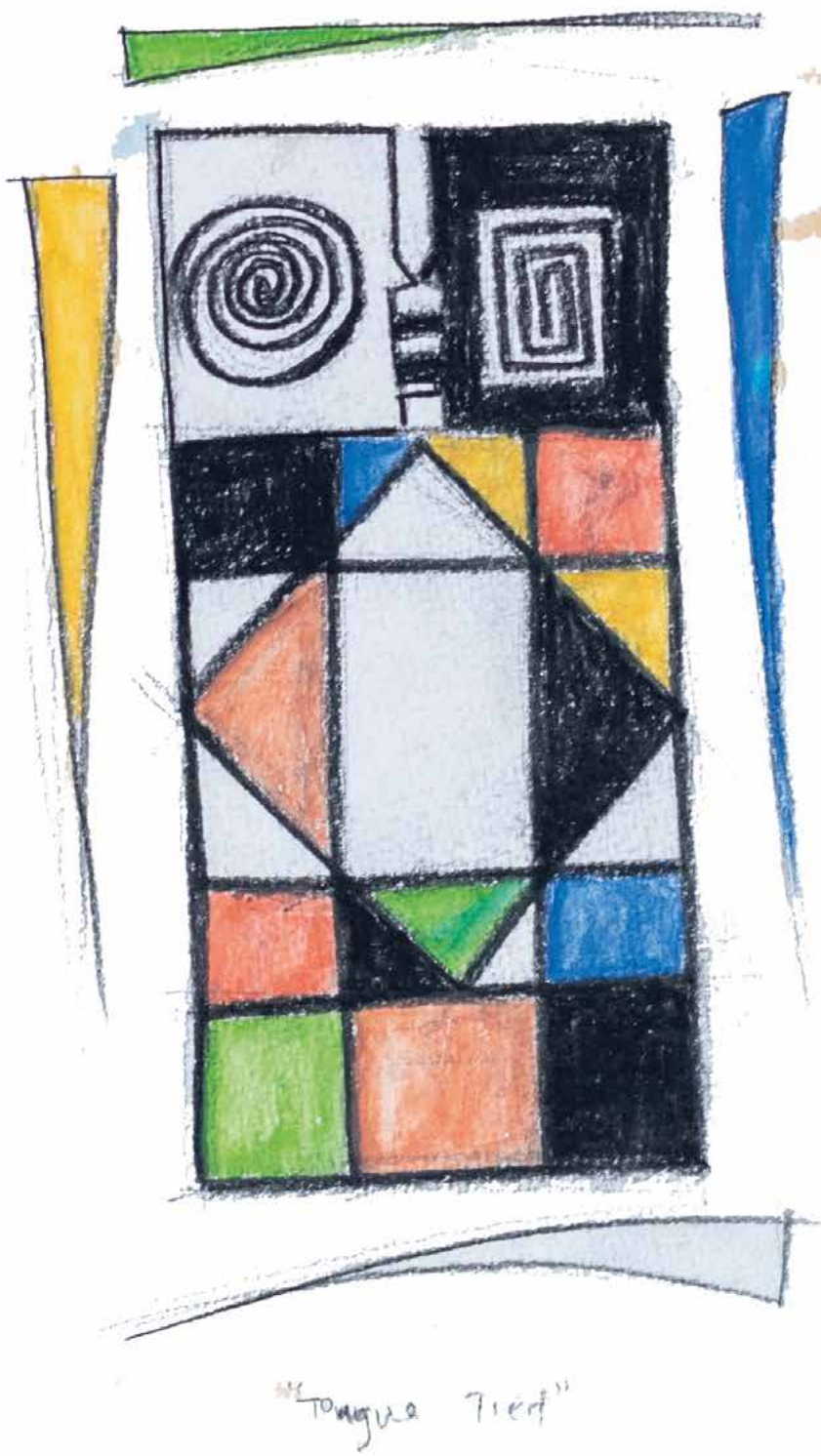
 Above: Sketch Book Series 2003-2006. Below: Sketch Book Series 2003-2006



Above: Sketch Book Series 2003-2006. Below: Sketch Book Series 2003-2006

 Above: *Untitled*, 2005, acrylic and pastel on canvas, 91 x 91 cm

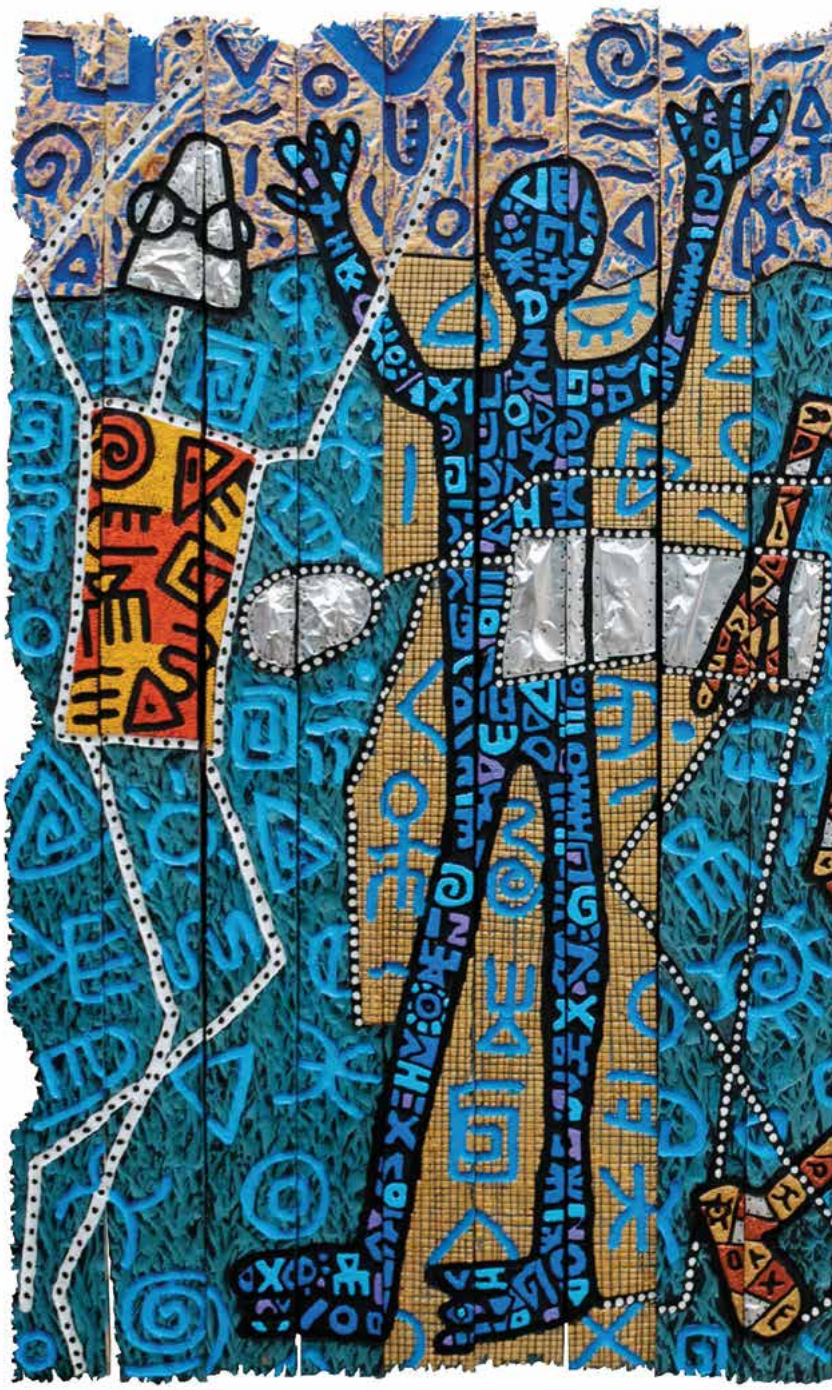
76 *Agape*, 2006, watercolour and charcoal on paper, 45 x 101 cm



Time and Space, 2004, watercolour and charcoal on paper, 41 x 76 cm

78 *Masqurade from Heaven*, 2009, found aluminium sheets, 122 x 183 x 305 cm

80 *Bird in Hand*, 2014, mixed media on wood, 68 x 124 x 183 cm



82 *People's Paradise 1*, 2014, mixed media on wood, 183 x 269 cm

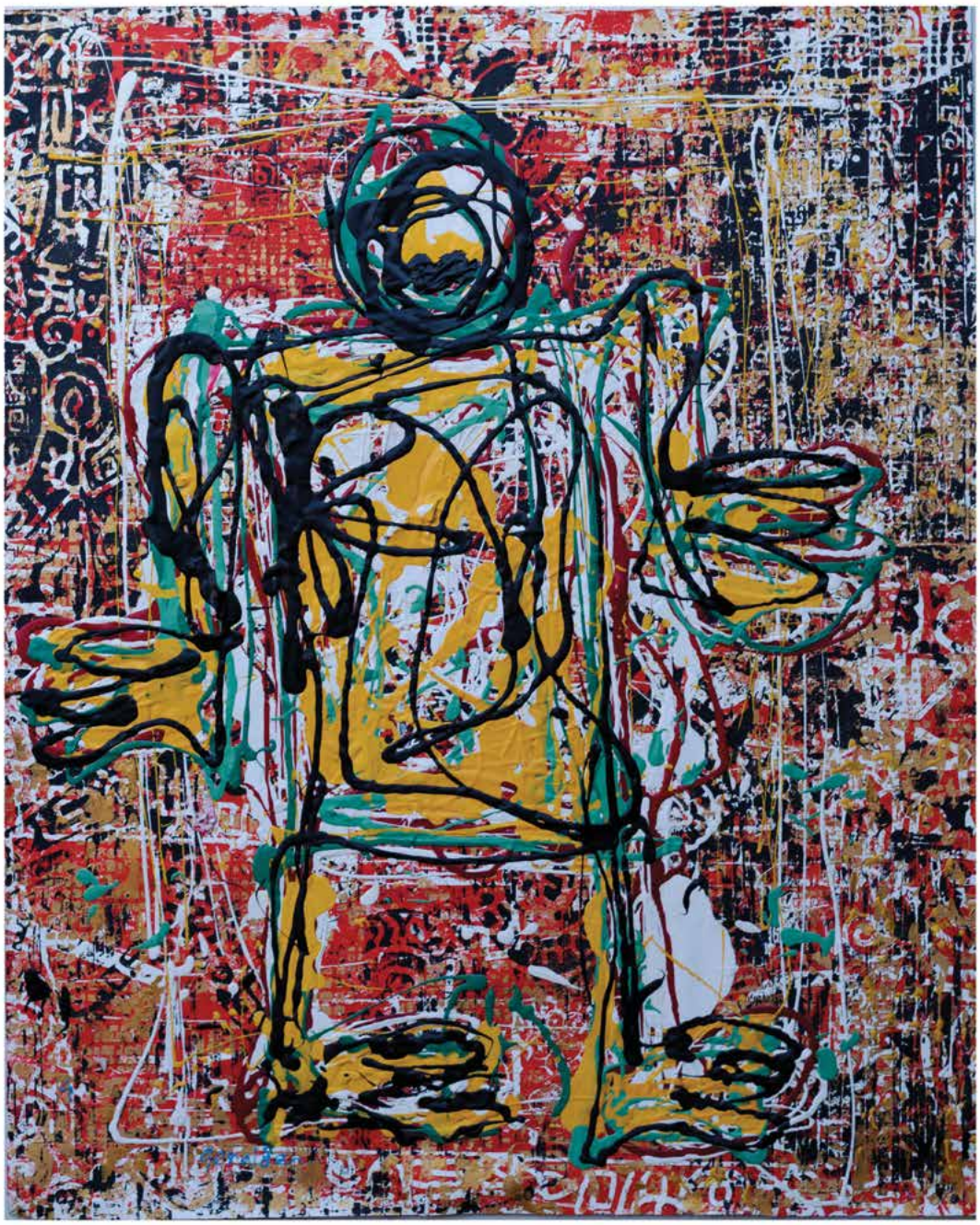
84 *I Know*, 2015, ink on watercolour paper, 56 x 76 cm

I Take, 2015, ink on watercolour paper, 56 x 76 cm

86 *Free*, 2015, mixed media on wood, 183 x 127 cm

Standing Tall, 2016, mixed media on wood, 213 x 180 cm

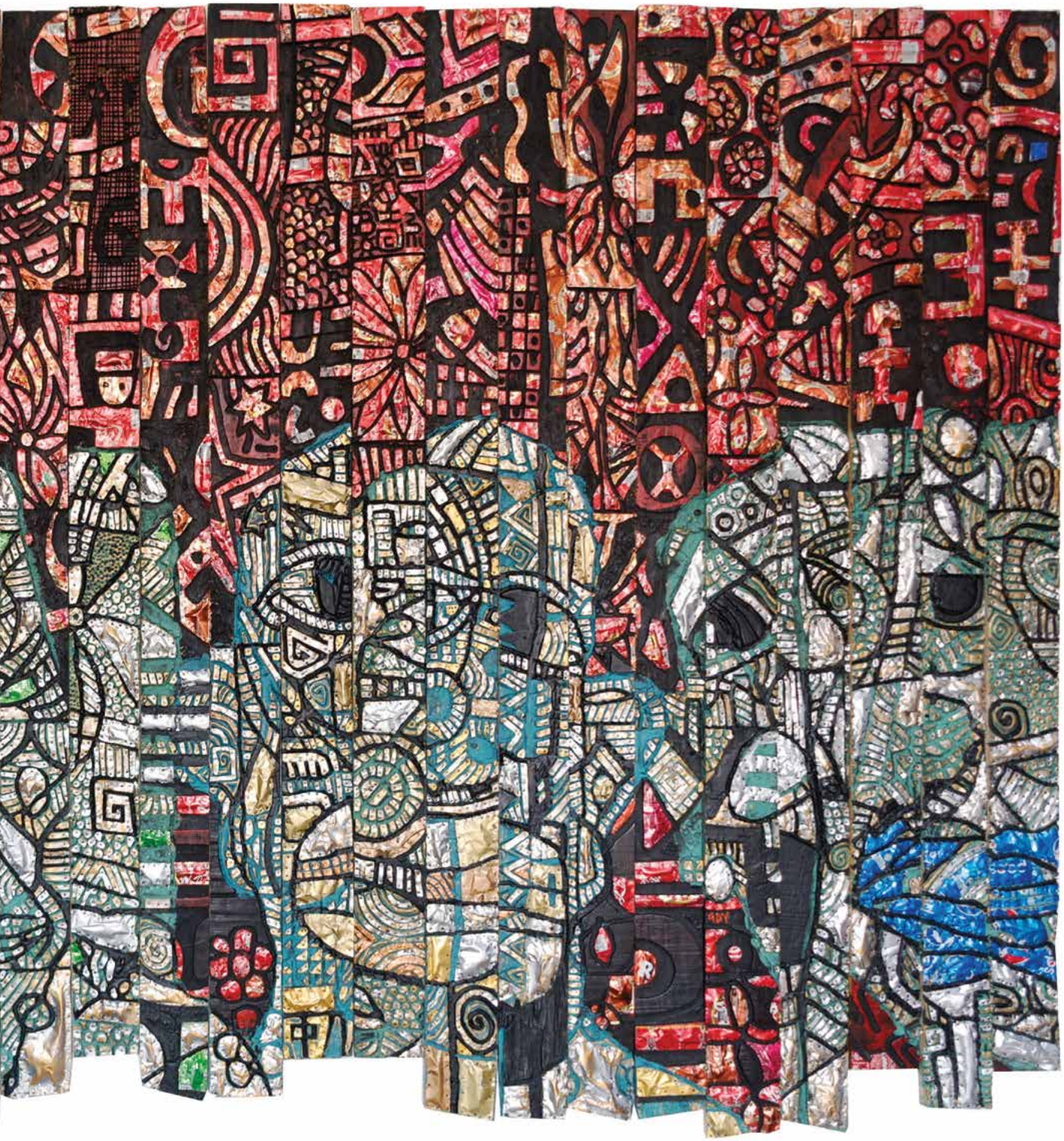
88 *You*, 2016, mixed media on wood, 152 x 167 cm



90 *Bus Stop; Pick Pocket*, 2017, lithograph and acrylic on paper, 107 x 114 cm

Bus Stop; Two to Beat One, 2017, lithograph and acrylic on paper, 107 x 132 cm

92 *Four Seasons*, 2017, mixed media on wood, 188 x 279 cm

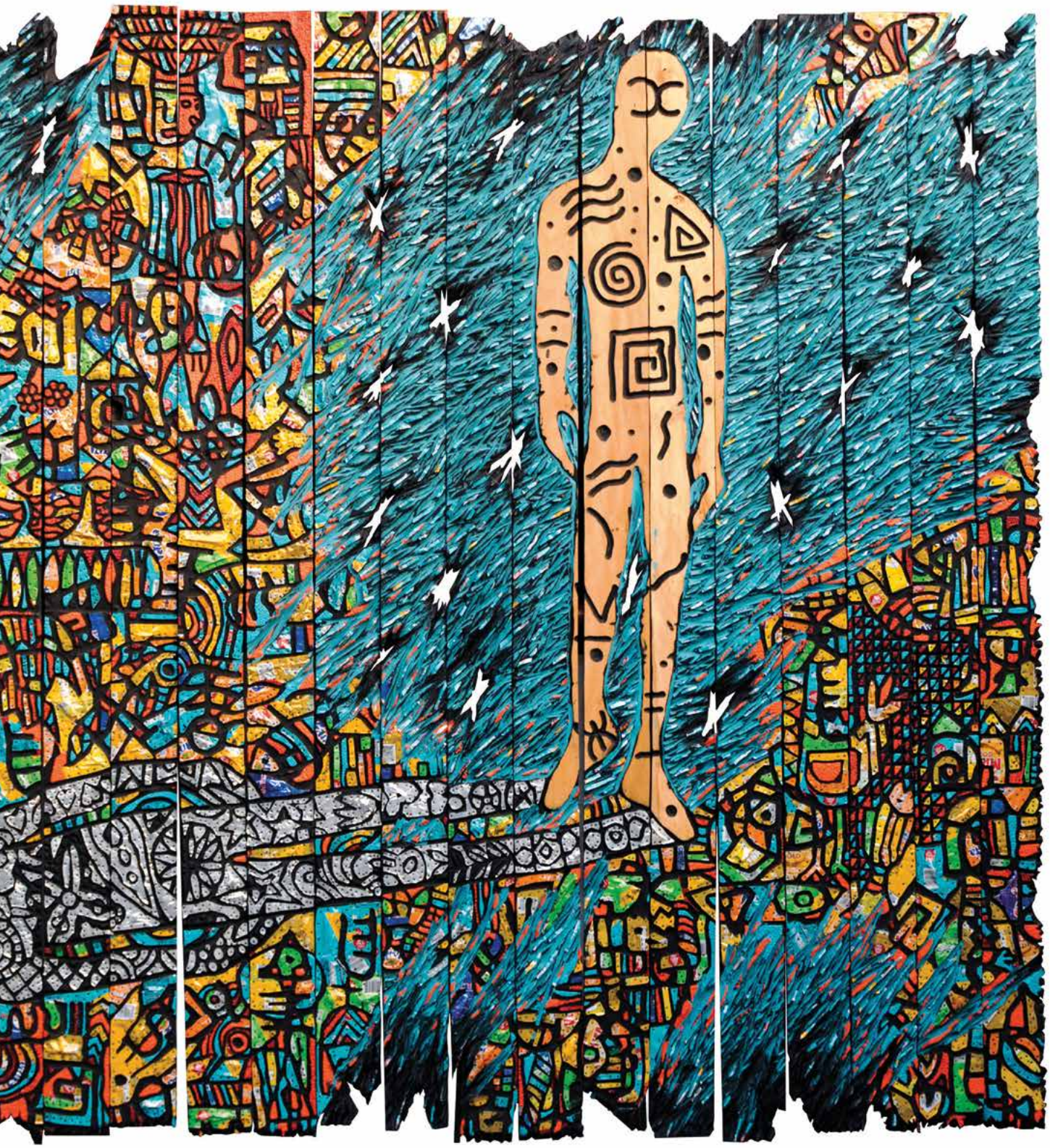


 Above: *What*, 2017, mixed media on wood, 51 x 51 cm. Below: *When*, 2017, mixed media on wood, 51 x 51 cm

Above: *Where*, 2017, mixed media on wood, 51 x 51 cm. Below: *Why*, 2017, mixed media on wood, 51 x 51 cm

96 *Where We Live*, 2017, mixed media on wood, 213 x 239 cm

98 *Last Man Standing II*, 2017, mixed media on wood, 193 x 262 cm

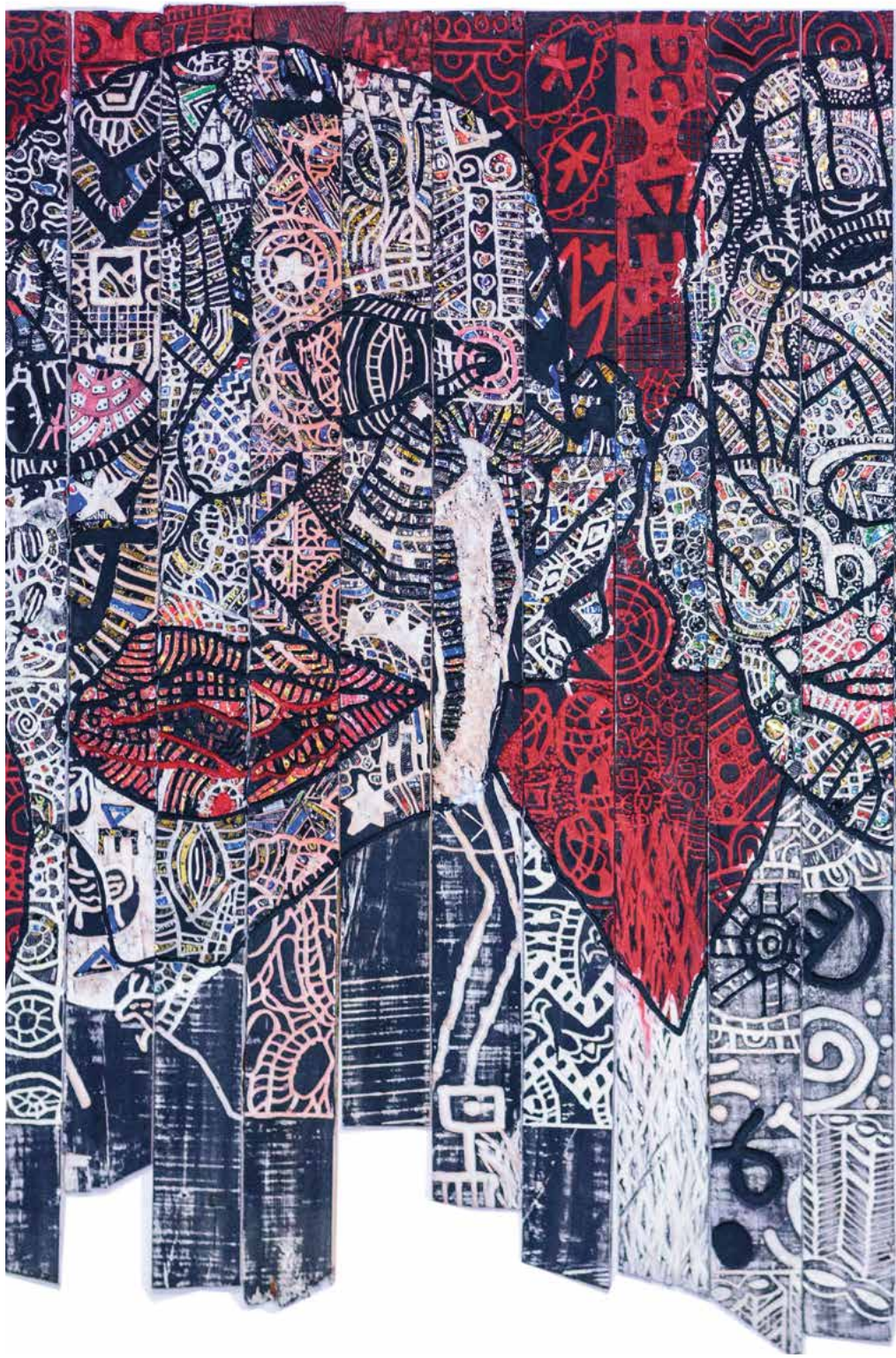


100 *'Nwoke N' Ife' The Story Teller's Journey*, 2018, mixed media, 213 x 170 cm

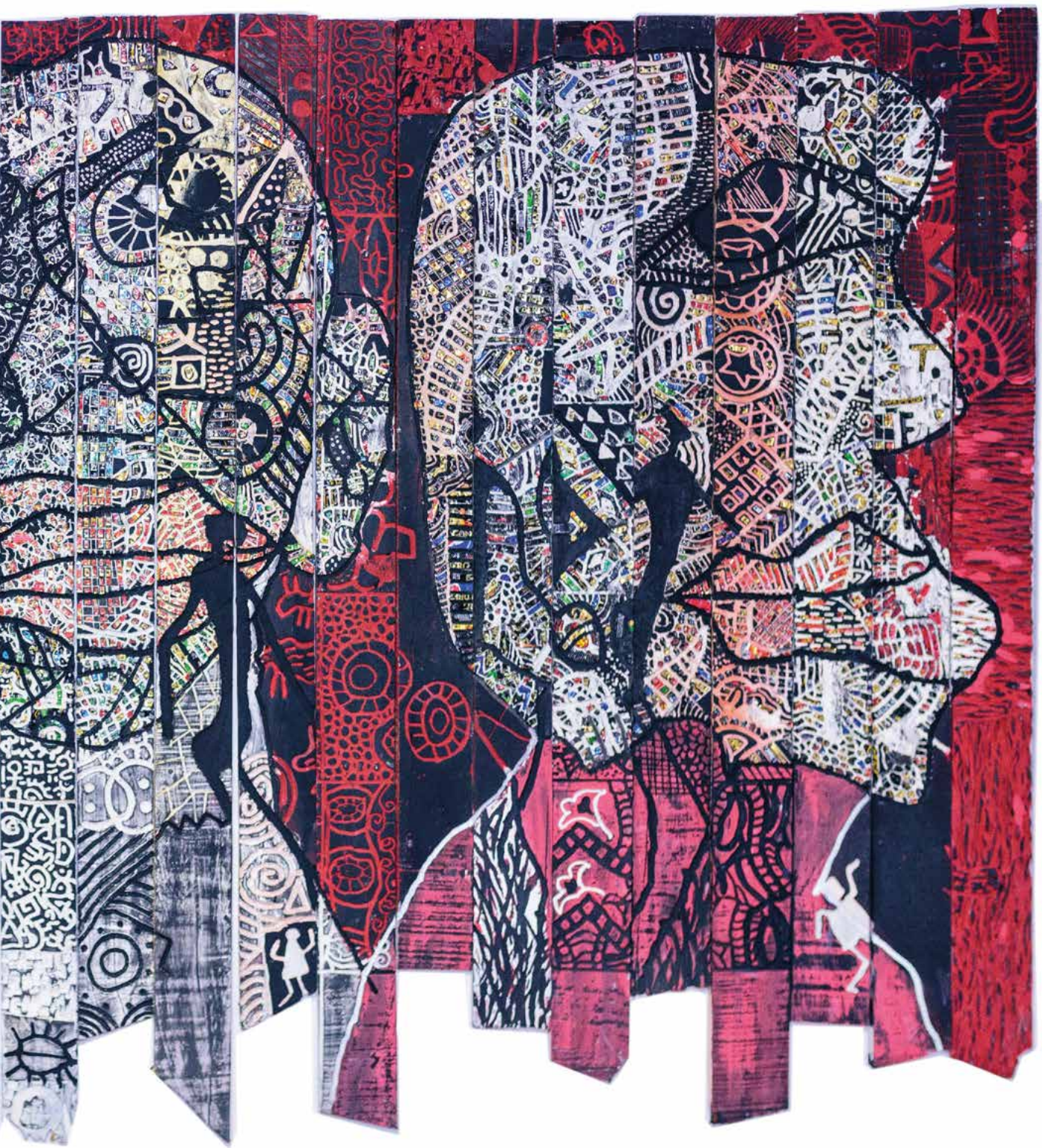
'Obi Agu' The Hard Man's Journey, 2018, mixed media, 213 x 170 cm

102 *The Hero's Story*, 2018, mixed media on wood, 137 x 168 cm

The Hunter's Story, 2019, mixed media on wood, 213 x 162 cm



104 *'Ije Uwa' The Journey of a Thousand Miles*, 2018, mixed media, 183 x 305 cm



106 *Orie; The Patient One*, 2018, mixed media, 114 x 76 cm

Eke; The Sacred One, 2018, mixed media on wood, 114 x 76 cm

108 *Afor; The Productive One*, 2018, mixed media, 114 x 76 cm

Nwamko; The Son of the Rich, 2018, mixed media on wood, 114 x 76 cm

110 *The Encounter*, 2019, mixed media on wood, 193 x 343 cm

112 *Untitled*, 2019, mixed media on canvas, 130 x 130 cm

*Efupu; Hot Summer Nigh*t, 2019, lithograph and acrylic on canvas, 107 x 122 cm

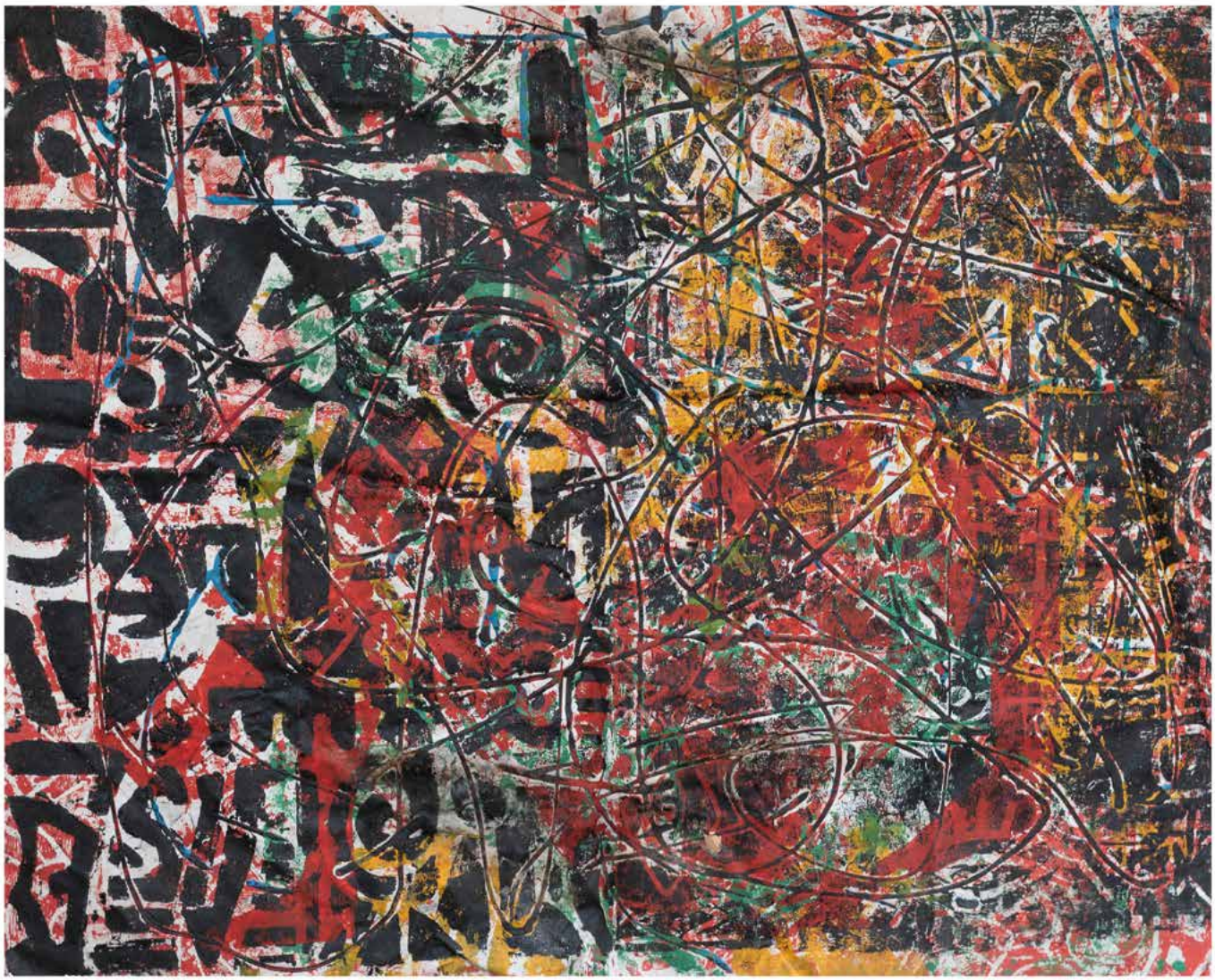
114 *Efupu; Thoughts & Found*, 2019, lithograph and acrylic on canvas, 107 x 122 cm

Efuru; At the Beach, 2019, lithograph and acrylic on canvas, 61 x 122 cm

116 *Efuru; Cake & Wine*, 2019, lithograph and acrylic on canvas, 107 x 122 cm

Efuru; Welcome, 2019, lithograph and acrylic on canvas, 107 x 122 cm

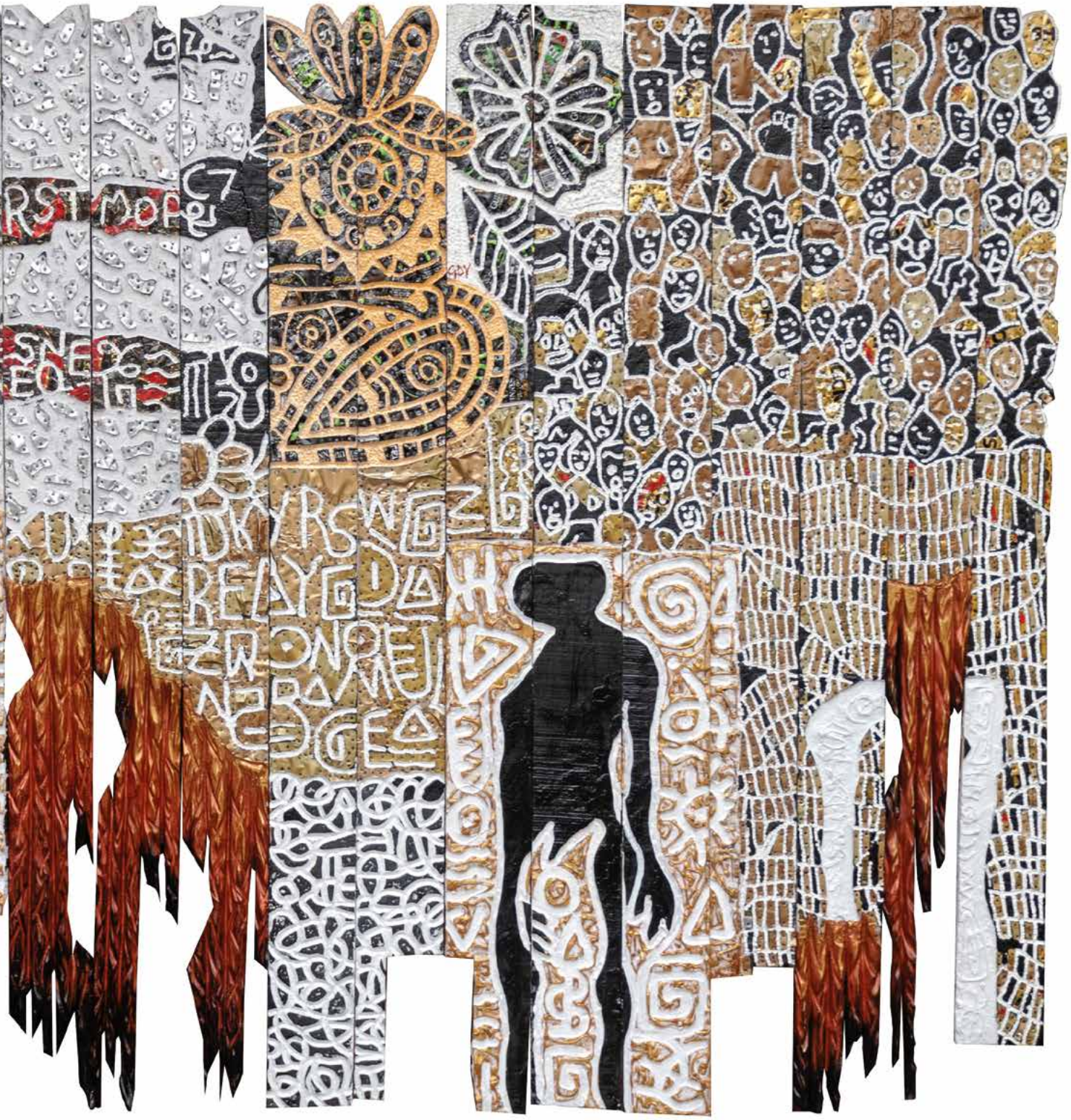
118 *Eruption I*, 2019, lithograph and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 163 cm



Eruption II, 2019, lithograph and acrylic on canvas, 155 x 160 cm

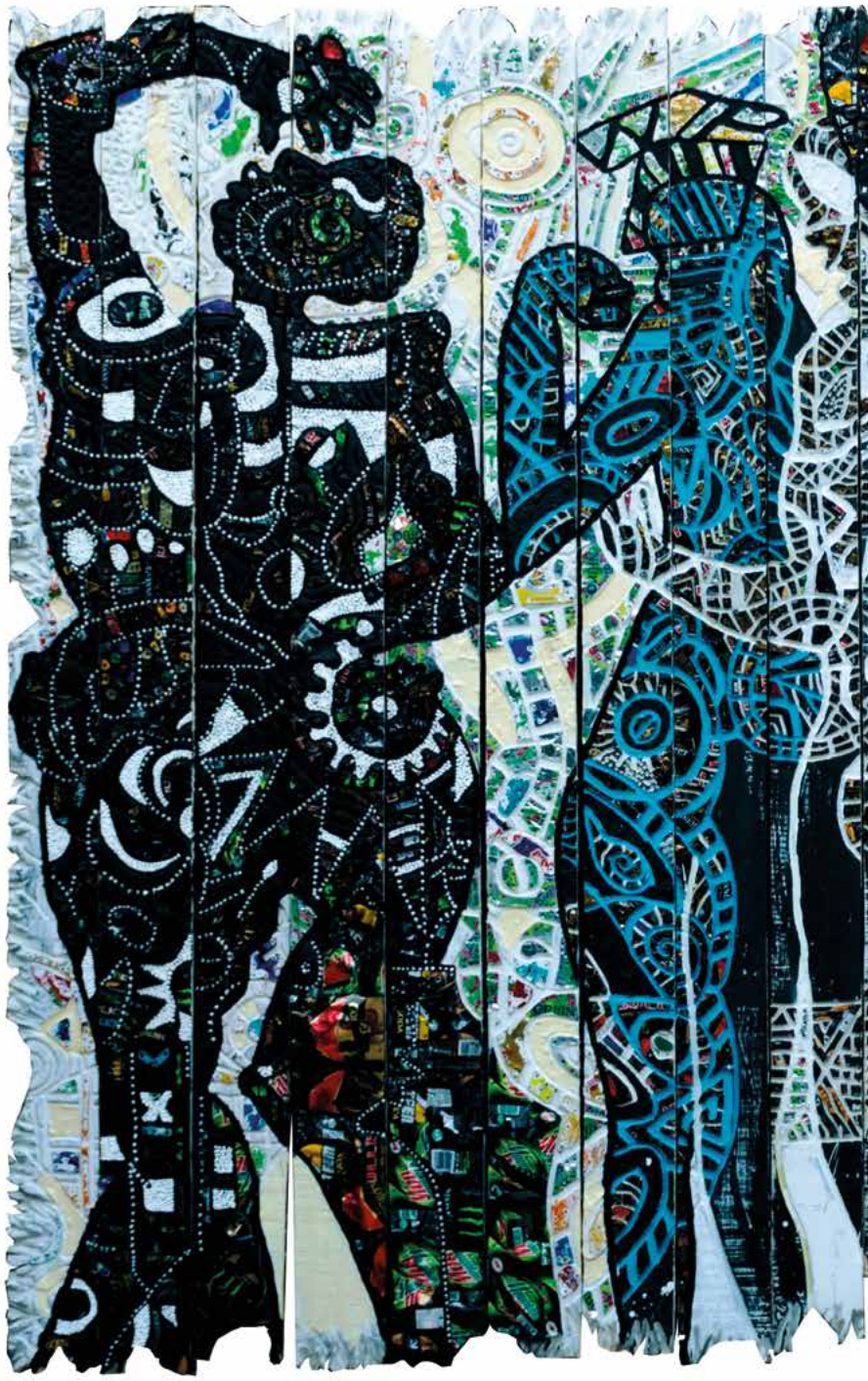
120 *Nude; I Know Where the Sun Lives*, 2019, mixed media on wood, 152 x 203 cm

122 *Nude; Man*, 2019, mixed media on wood, 183 x 262 cm



124 *Elewe Ukwu; And Women Rule the World*, 2019, mixed media, 198 x 297 cm

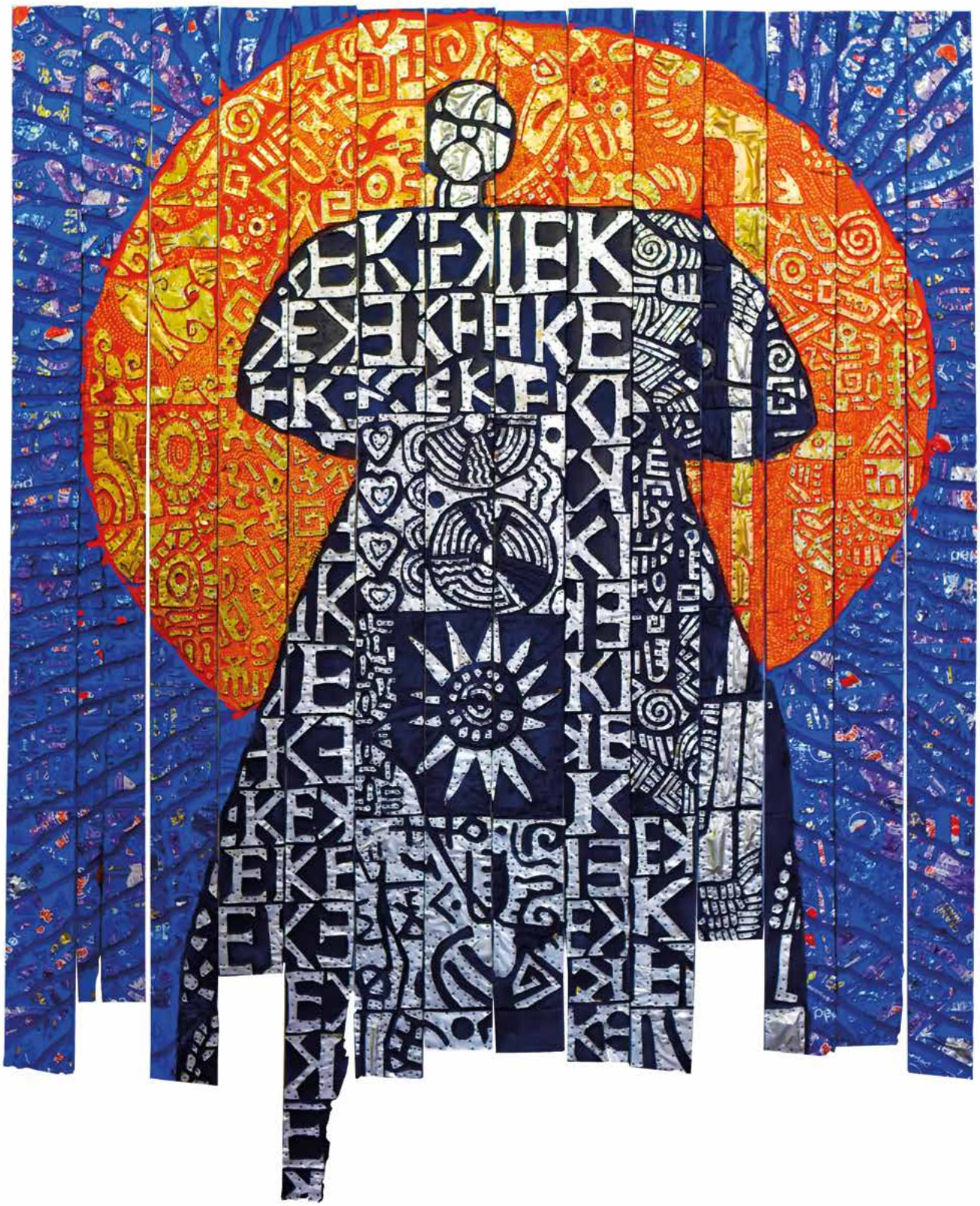
126 Egwu Amara - Paddles with One Voice*, 2019, mixed media on wood, 188 x 297 cm*



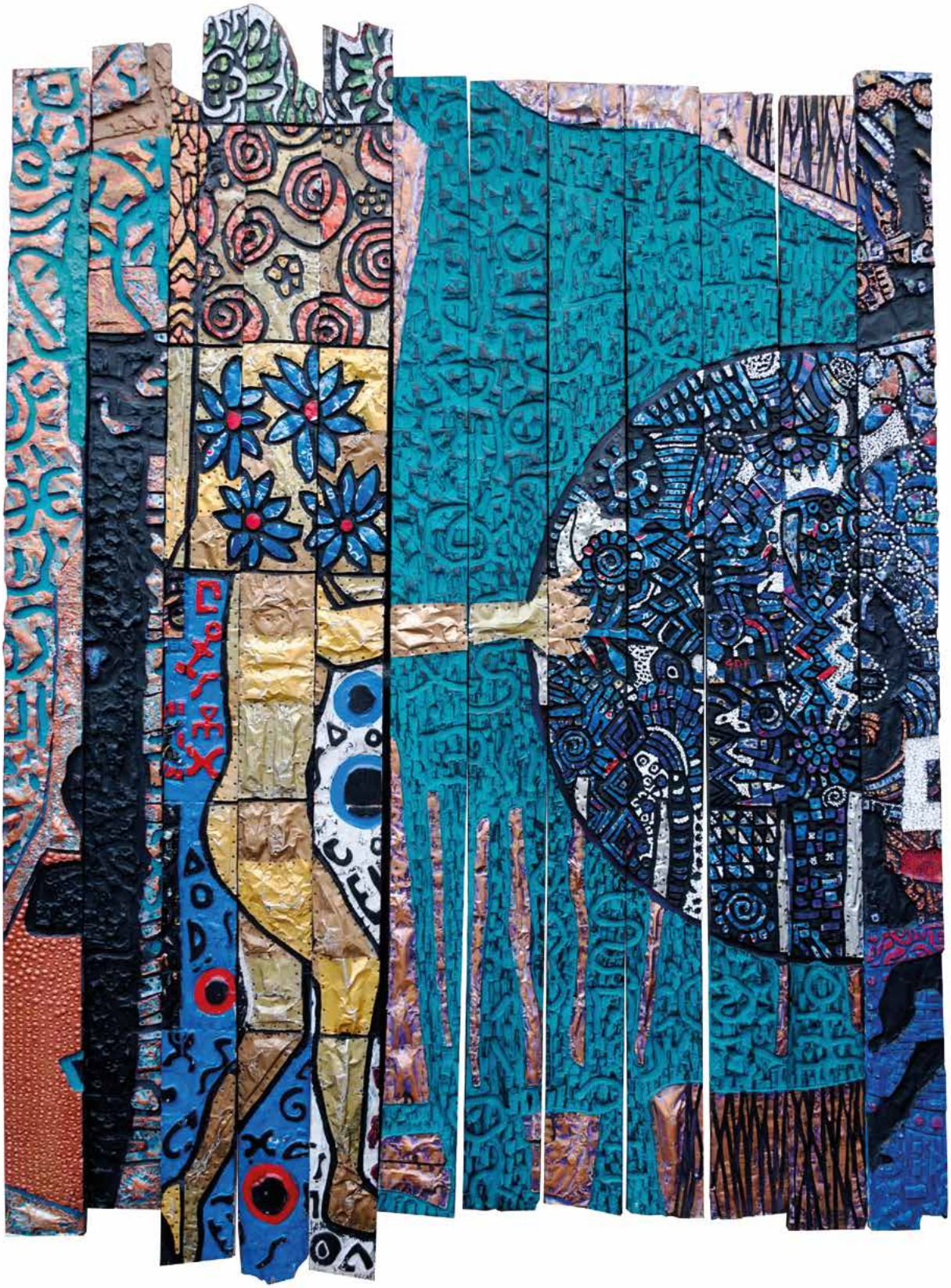
128 *Ikwokirikwo; The Moonlight Dance*, 2020, mixed media on wood, 183 x 305 cm

130 *Blue Moon*, 2020, mixed media, 183 x 249 cm

132 *Eke Anyanwi*, 2020, mixed media on wood, 213 x 157 cm



134 *After*, 2020, mixed media on wood, 185 x 170 cm

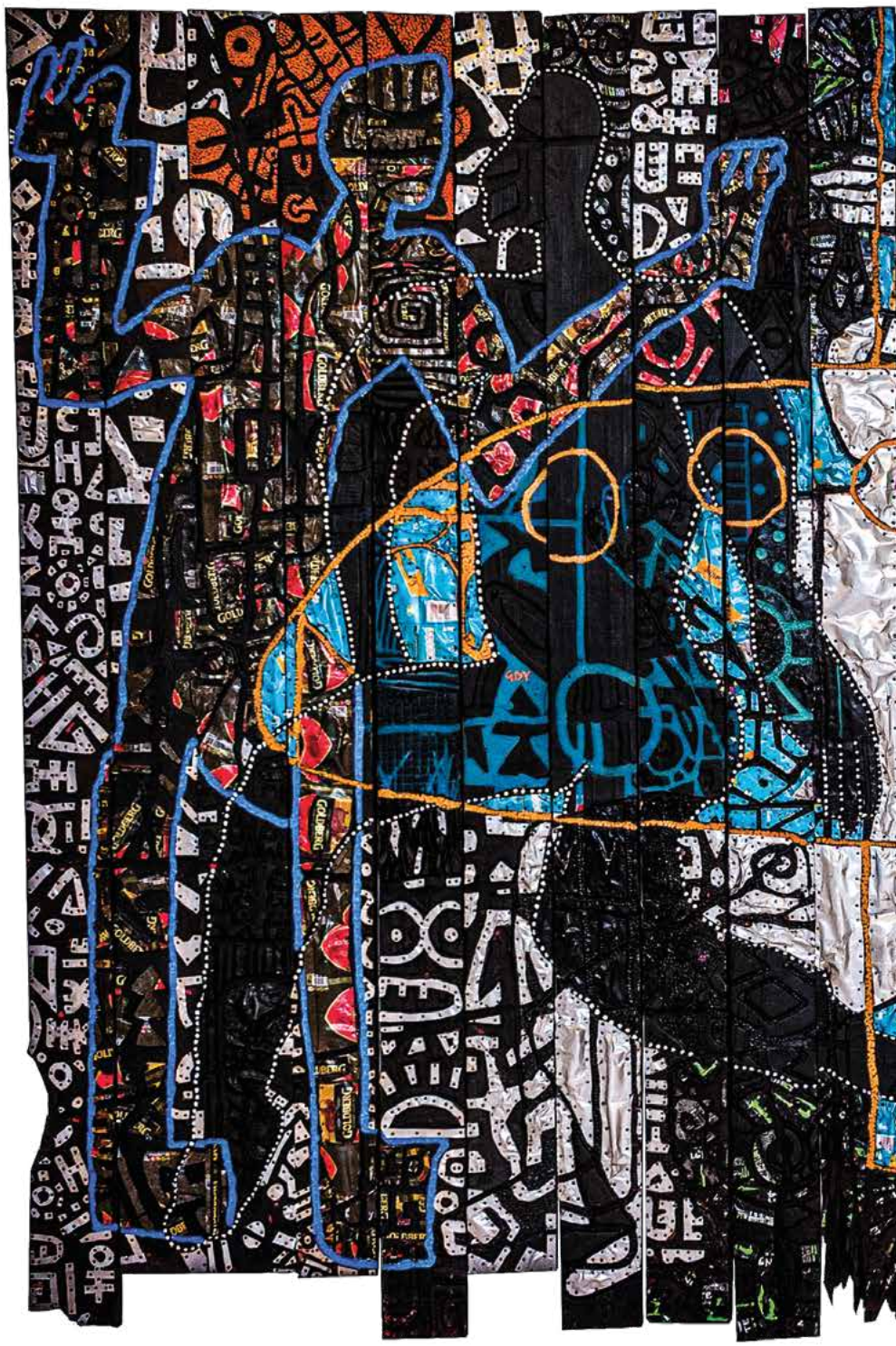


I Came, 2020, mixed media on wood, 203 x 163 cm

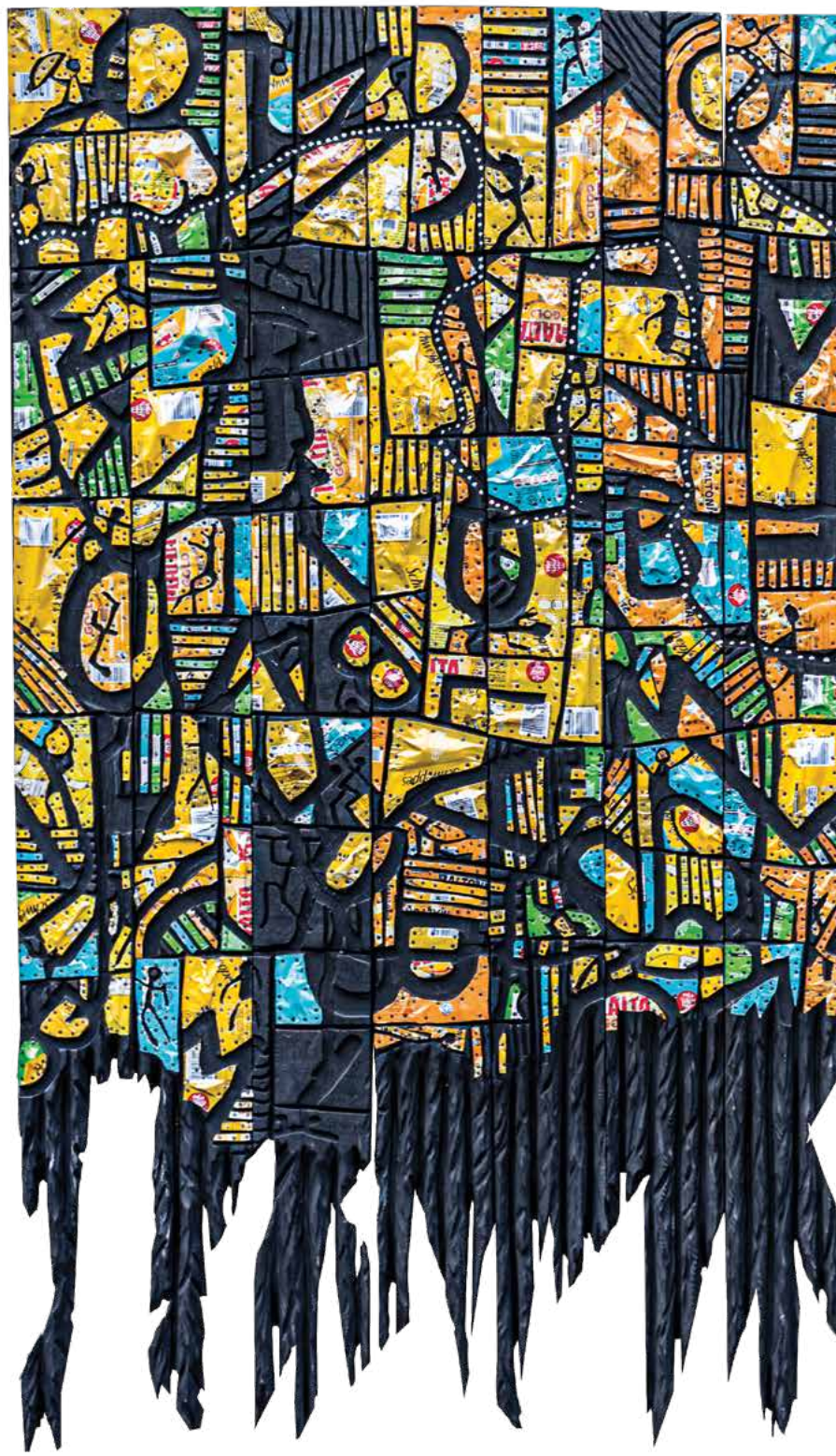
136 *I Saw*, 2020, mixed media on wood, 203.2 x 162.2 cm

I Danced, 2020, mixed media on wood, 203.2 x 162.6 cm

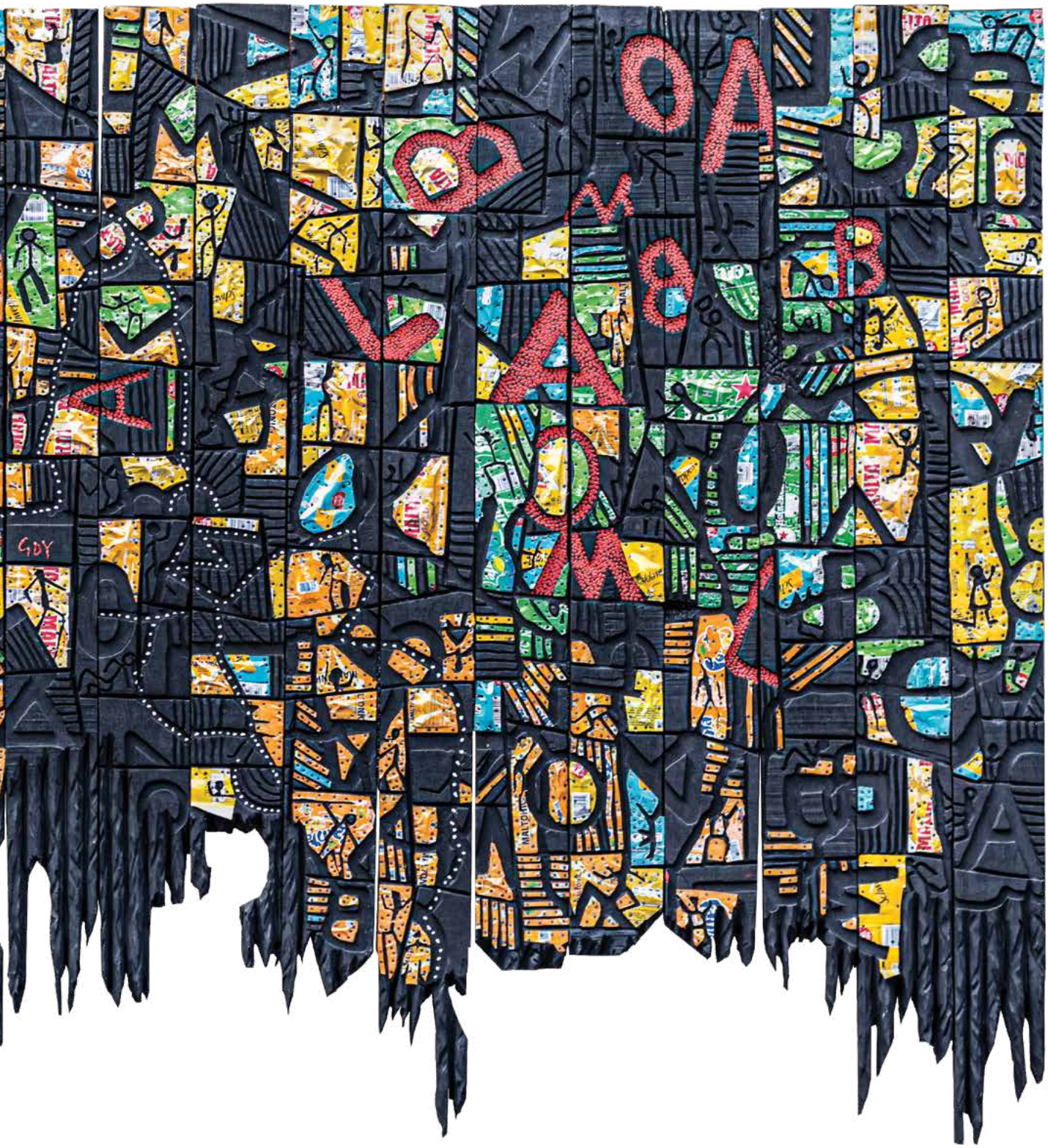
138 *'If We Agree...Then We Agree'*, 2020, mixed media, 188 x 271.8 cm



140 *Fly Away Pita Fly Away Pol... Come Back Pita Come Back Pol*, 2020, mixed media on wood, 198.1 x 320 cm



142 *Ala*, 2020, mixed media on wood, 152 x 233 cm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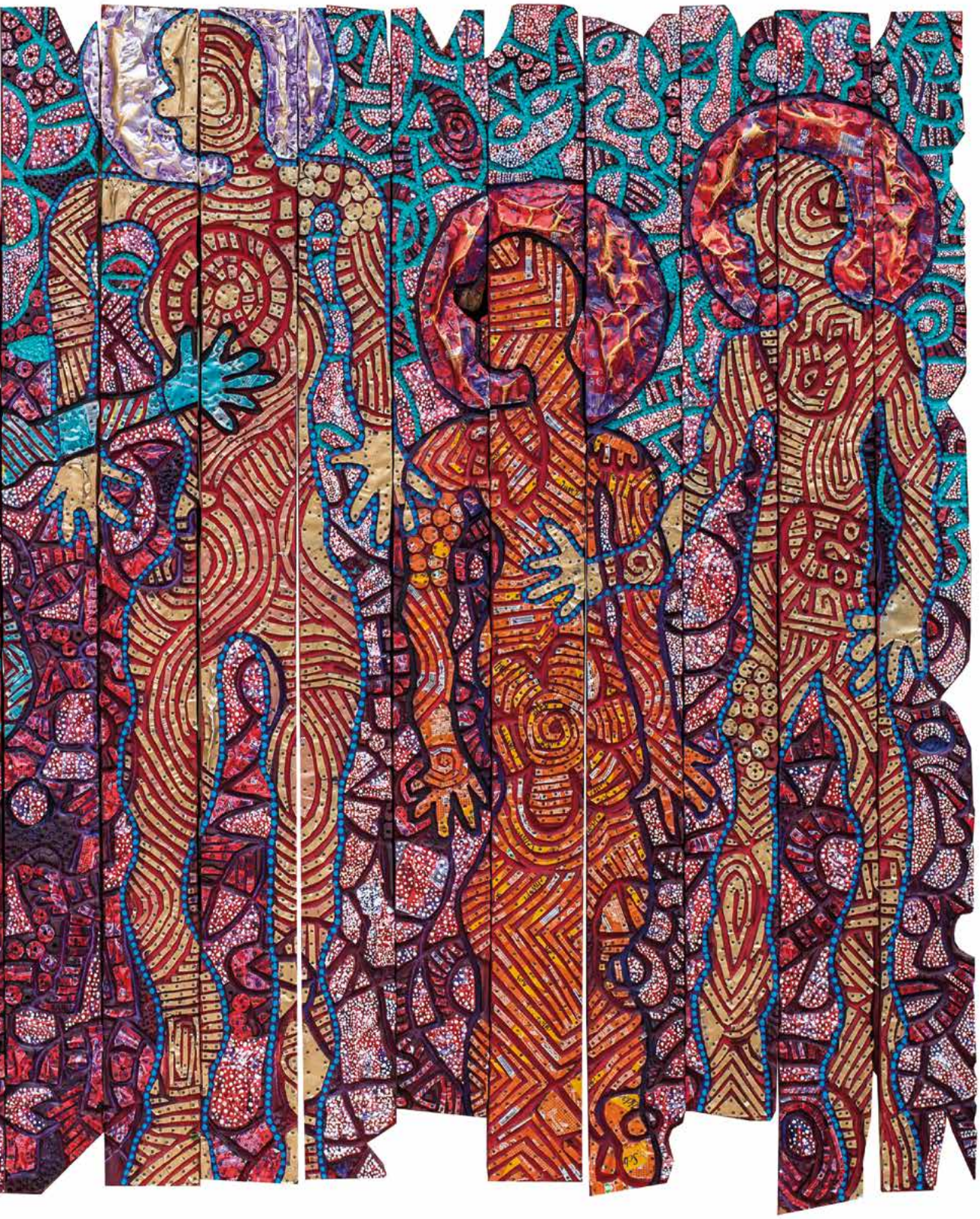
144 *As We Look*, 2020, mixed media on wood, 157 x 203 cm

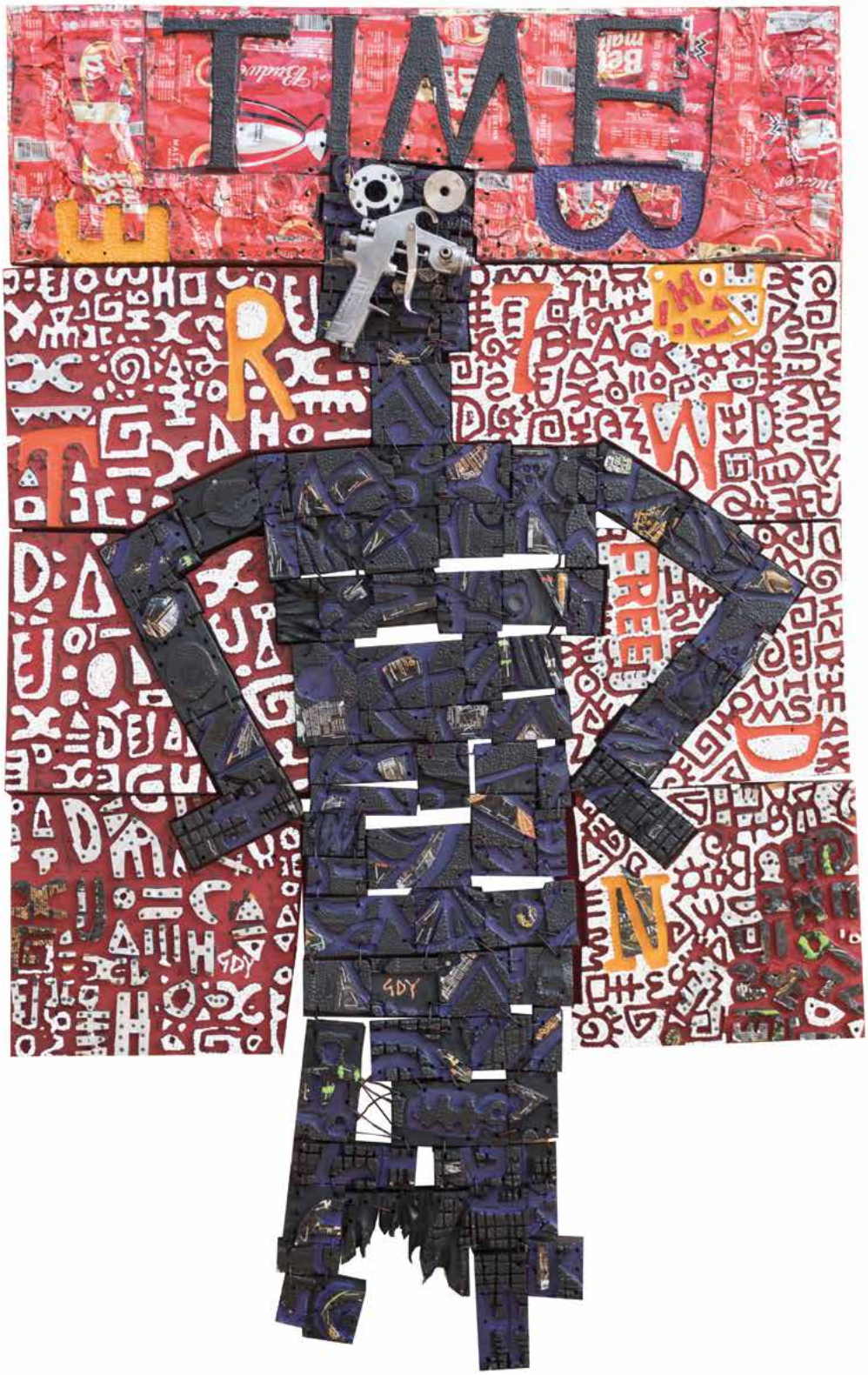


146 *Black Saints; Adaobika*, 2020, mixed media on wood, 114 x 121 cm

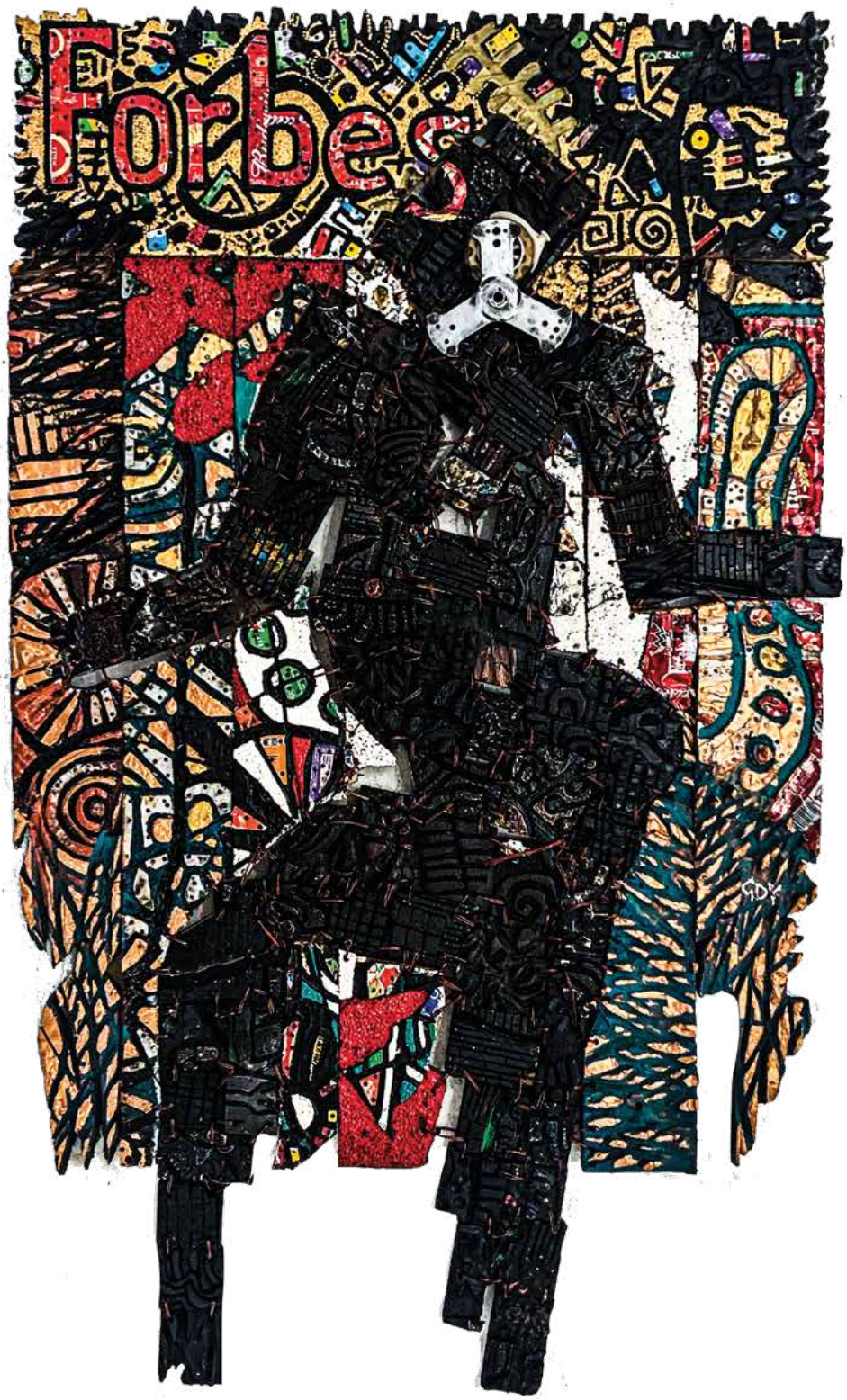
Black Saints; Okorodudu, 2020, mixed media on wood, 114 x 121 cm

148 *Untold Stories - Cover Up*, 2021, mixed media on wood, 147 x 81 cm

Untold Stories - Hands Up, 2021, mixed media on wood, 137 x 81 cm



150 *Untold Stories - Time Up*, 2021, mixed media on wood, 137 x 81 cm



Untold Stories; Dance Up, 2021, mixed media on wood, 174 x 84 cm

152 *Empty Oil Barrel Series*, 2021, barrels and resin, 35.6 x 22.9 x 22.9 cm each

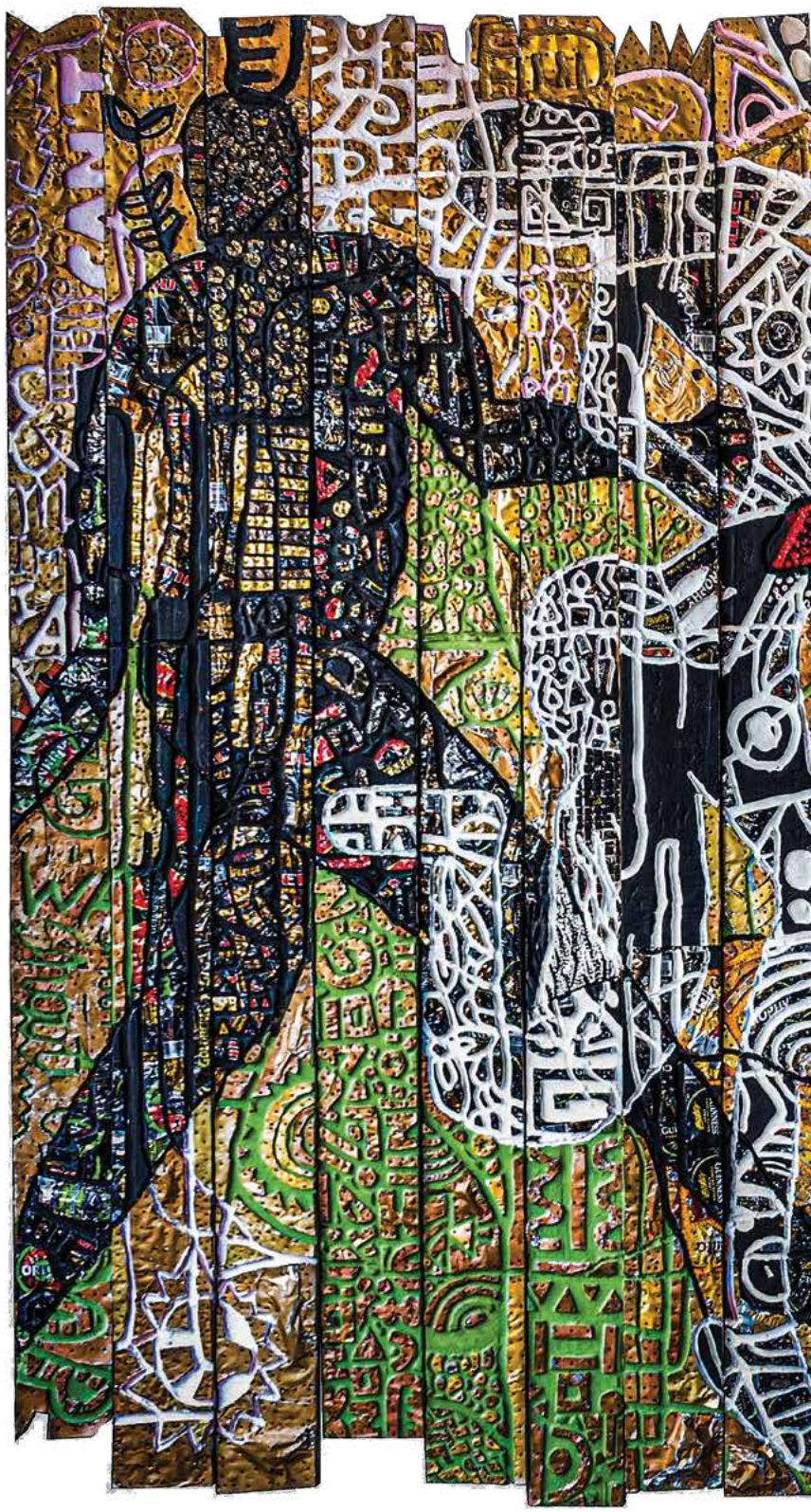
154 *Ogadiligmma*, 2021, mixed media, 200.7 x 11.8 x 58.4 cm

Ogbunigwe, 2021, Mixed media, 193 x 116.8 x 78.7 cm

156 *Afro*, 2021, mixed media on wood, 218.4 x 208.3 cm

158 *After 2*, 2021, mixed media on wood, 167.6 x 261.6 cm

160 *Together Together*, 2021, mixed media on wood, 182.9 x 269.2 cm

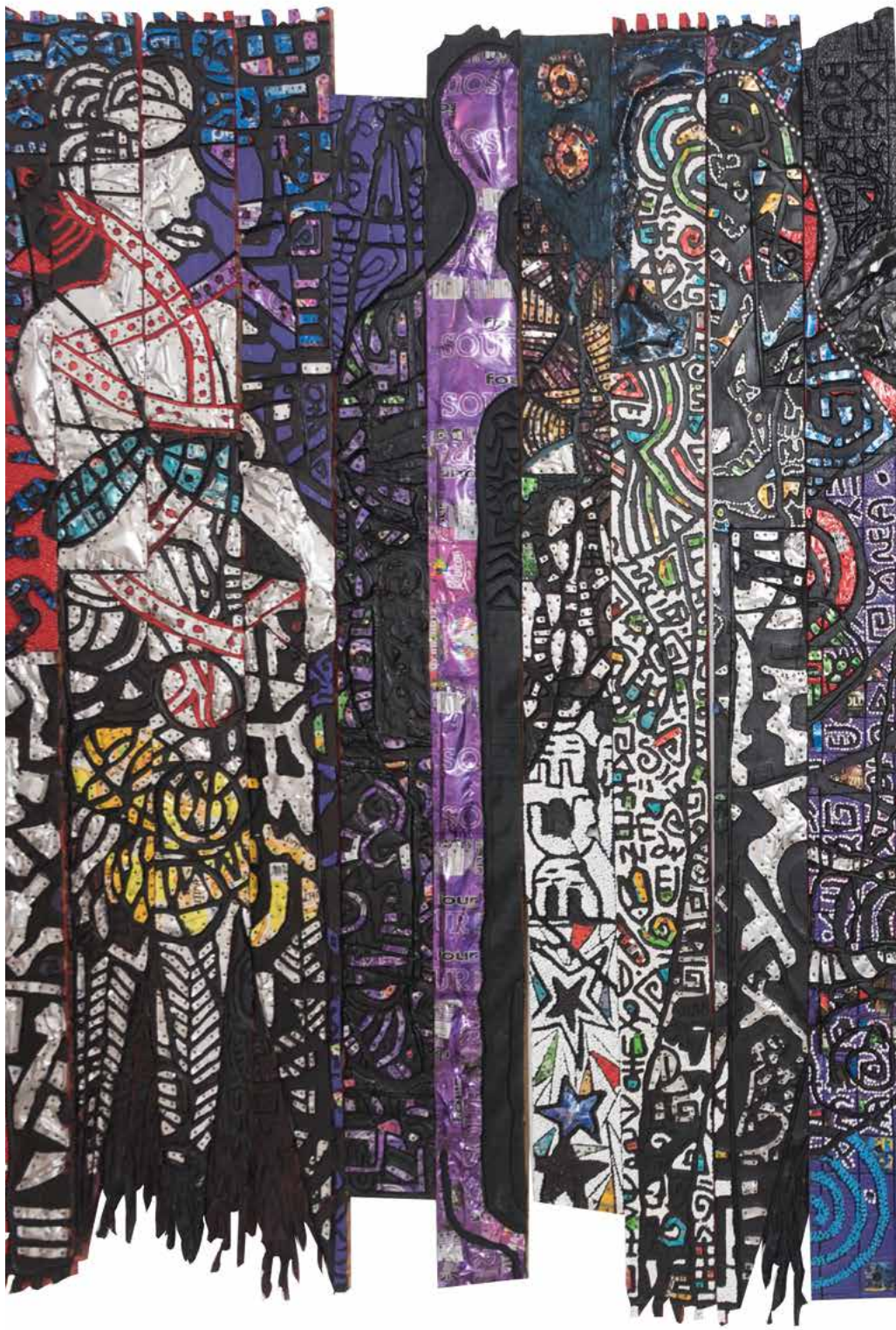


162 *Moonlight Dance*, 2021, mixed media on wood, 213.4 x 322.6 cm

164 *Look, the Stars are in Love*, 2021, 259.1 x 200.7 cm

166 *And the Sun Came Out to Dance, 2021, mixed media, 259.1 x 200.7 cm*

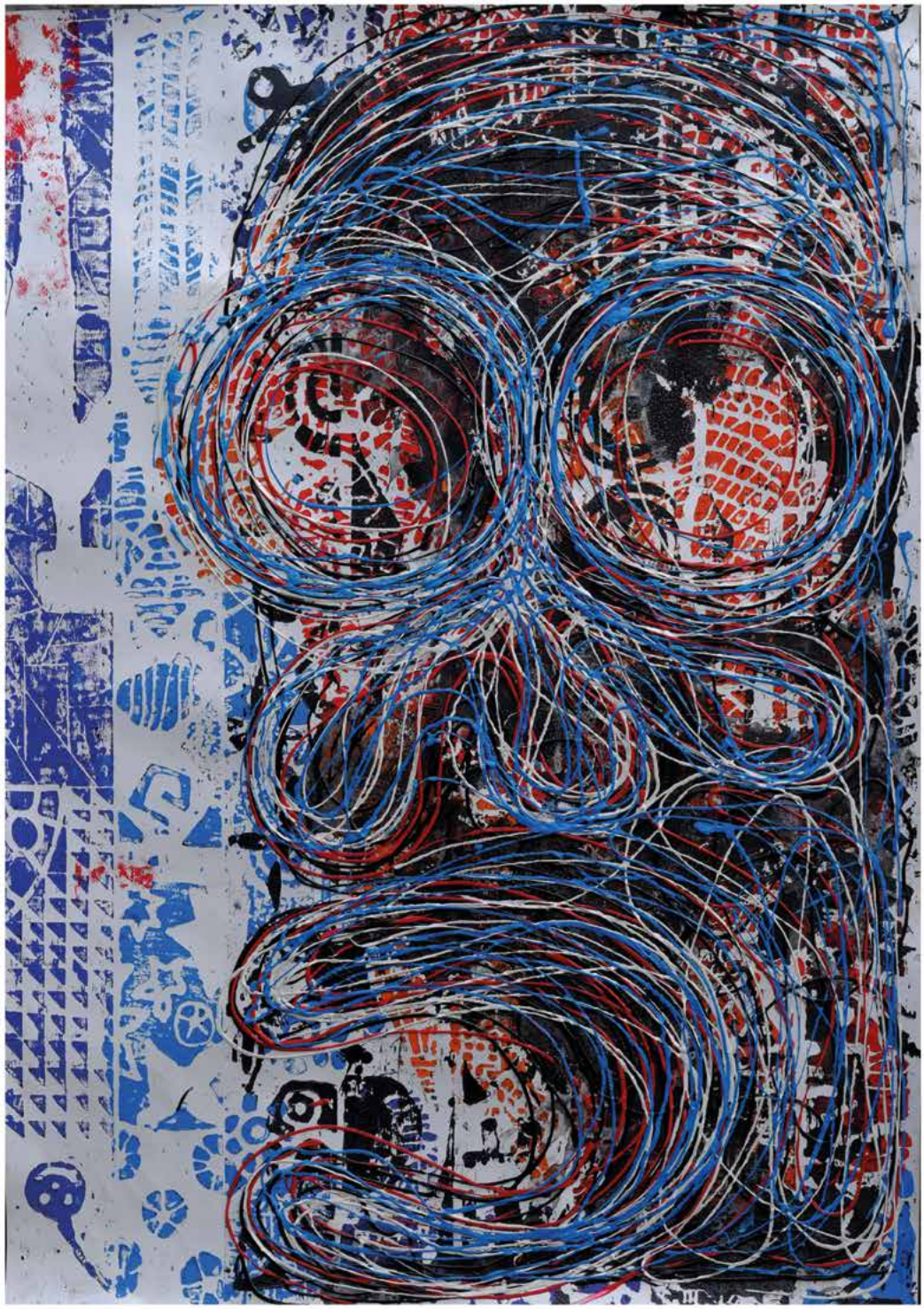
But the Moon Clapped and Sang, 2021, mixed media, 259.1 x 200.7 cm



168 *Flower Girls*, 2021, mixed media on wood, 183 x 269 cm

170 *The Constellation of a Naked Sky*, 2021, mixed media on wood, 183 x 254 cm

172 *Nude; At the Beginning*, 2021, mixed media on wood, 183 x 305 cm



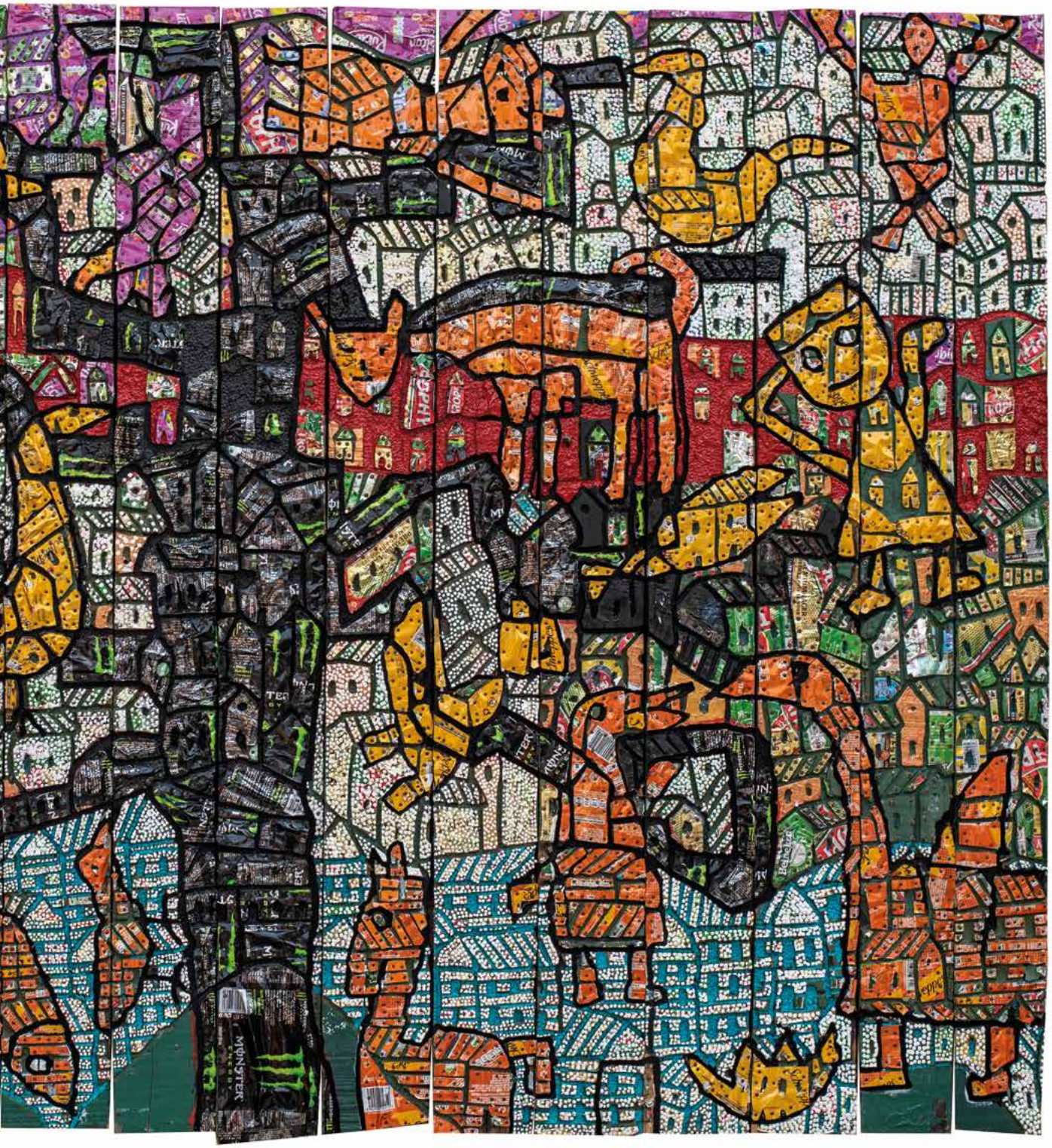
174 *Strata Stories I*, 2022, lithograph and acrylic on paper, 107 x 117 cm

Strata Stories III, 2022, lithograph and acrylic on paper, 107 x 117 cm

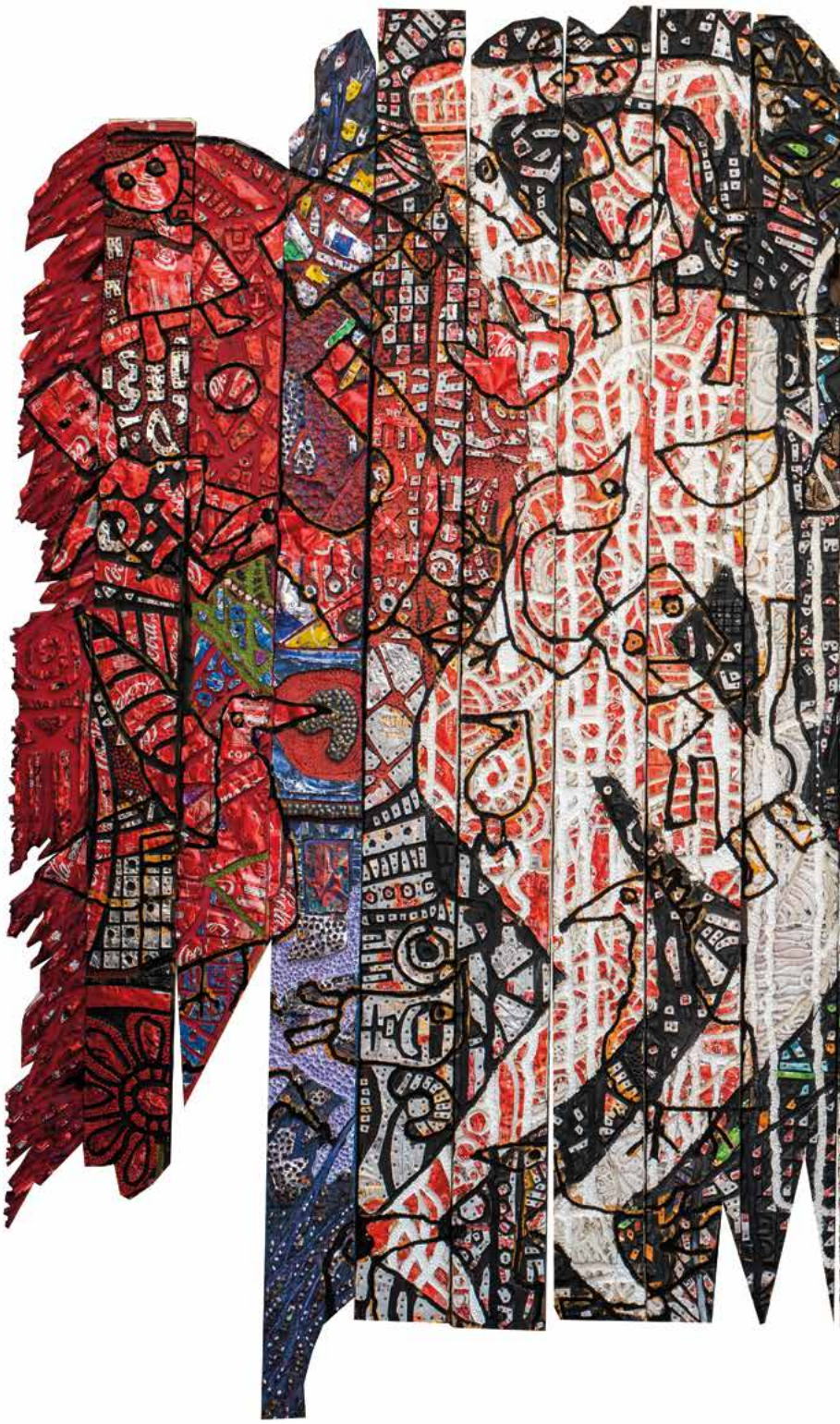
176 *Strata Stories V*, 2022, lithograph and acrylic on paper, 107 x 117 cm

Strata Stories VI, 2022, lithograph and acrylic on paper, 107 x 117 cm

178 *Cloud of Many Witnesses; Shelter*, 2022, mixed media on wood, 114 x 203 cm


MONSTER

180 *Cloud of Many Witnesses; Purple Blues*, 2022, mixed media on wood, 170 x 272 cm



182 *Cloud of Many Witnesses; Where Angels Meet*, 2023, mixed media on wood, 183 x 297 cm

184 *The Same Frequency*, 2023, mixed media, 199 x 366 cm

186 *Out of the Abundance of the Heart*, 2023, mixed media on wood, 183 x 366 cm

BIOGRAPHY / CV

Gerald Chukwuma (b. 1973) lives and works in Lagos, Nigeria. He graduated in 2003 with First Class Honours from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Chukwuma is noted for his intricately crafted sculptures on wood panels. The materials he chooses are common enough; however, using in his unique way a range of techniques — including burning, chiselling, and painting — he captures a richly layered history that is imbedded with personal and political meaning. The use of traditional Uli and Nsibidi symbols links his work to the Nsukka art tradition which is credited with expanding and modernising the Igbo cultural aesthetic.

EDUCATION

2003 University of Nigeria, Nsukka

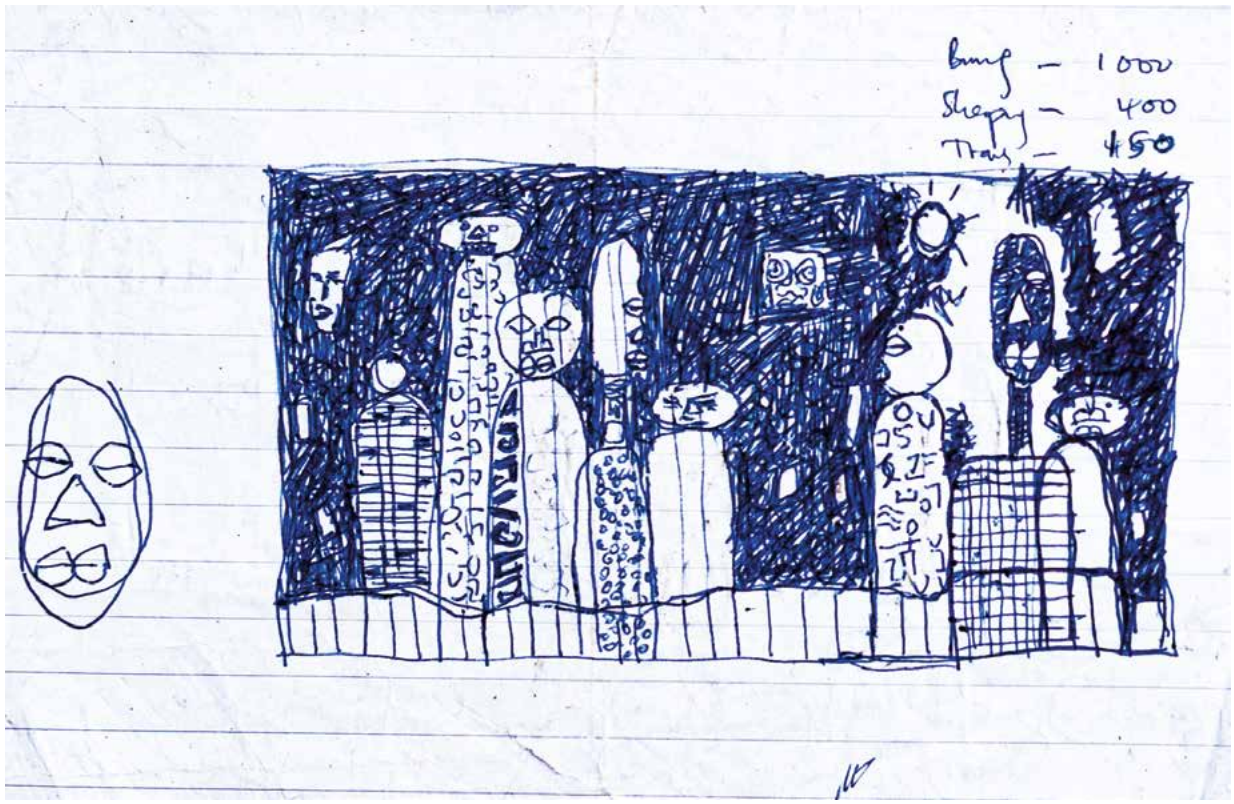
SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2023 *Homeostatis*, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London
2021 *Eclipse of the Scrolls*, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery (London Bridge), London
2020 *IKWOKIRIKWO: THE DANCE OF SPIRITS*, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Berlin
Negritude: The Igbo Has Landed, Urevbu Contemporary, Memphis Tennessee
2019 *Wrinkles*, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London
2017 *Standing Ovation*, Gallery 1957, Accra
2016 *People's Paradise*, Temple Muse, Lagos
2014 *Soaking up Beauty*, Constant Capital, Lagos
2013 *Highlife II*, Ethnocentrique, Lagos

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2022 *Forward to the Past: Reengaging Uli in New Experiments*, Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London UK
Uprising, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Schloss Goerne, Germany
2021 Untitled Miami, Miami, USA
Travels with Herodotus-A Journey through African Cultures, Galleria Bianconi, Milano
2020 Enter Art Fair, with Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Copenhagen
Untitled Art San Francisco, with Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, San Francisco
2019 1-54 London with Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London
Kubatana, Curated by Kristin Hjellegjerde, Vesfossen, Kunslaboratorium, Norway
A Journey into Contemporary African Art, Belvedere Art Space, Beirut, Lebanon
2018 ART X Lagos Art Fair, Lagos
The Art Story, Cartoon art Gallery, Dubai, UAE
2016 ART X Lagos Art Fair, Lagos
2015 *Essentials*, Alexis Galleries, Lagos
The Contemporaries, The Wheatbeaker, Lagos
Today in History, Thought Pyramid Art Gallery, Abudja
2012 *Music Lesson*, Alexis Gallery, Lagos
2011 *Highlife I*, Ethnocentrique, Accra

2010 *Heden Daagse Afrikaanse Kunst*, Amsterdam Pachakucha: Inspire Japan, Terra Kulture, Lagos
2009 *Reclaiming Africa*, Geothe Institute, Lagos In Pursuit of Knowledge, Civic Centre, Lagos
Africa Now, The World Bank, USA
Moderne Afikansu Kunst, Danish Center for Culture and Development, Denmark
2008 *Mouling Matter*, Pan African University, Lagos The Unbreakable Nigerian Spirit,
Galarie 23, Amsterdam
2006 *With a Human Face*, Pan African University, Lagos
2004 *Salt of the Earth*, PACA Biennale, Enugu
2003 *Awakened Instincts*, PACA Biennale, Nimbus Art Center, Lagos



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ALMAS ART FOUNDATION

Almas Art Foundation (AAF) is a London based non-profit organisation that is committed to celebrating the invaluable contributions made by African and African diaspora artists to Modern and contemporary visual arts.

AAF aims to present and create an awareness for the practices of established and mid-career African and African diaspora artists through a programme of publications, exhibitions and films, documenting these artists' practices for a new generation of African artists, scholars and the wider international art community.

AAF aims to foster collaborations with emerging artists, curators and writers to support the arts ecosystem in Africa and facilitate residencies through partnerships with universities, institutions and independent initiatives.

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