mother tongue

Temple Muse
Lagos
2013

Curator:
Sandra Mbanefo Obiago
Mother Tongue: Layers of Meaning

Everyone has a mother tongue. It is our deepest verbal memory. It is the language of comfort and security. A mental space that rekindles our first sensations of life, protected by the presence of mother, who was our guide. Mother helped us to decipher and interpret the world around us. She painstakingly taught us language, culture and history, which we in turn, by following and learning from our family’s unique verbal map, were finally able to draw from to communicate our unique impressions of the world around us.

In Mother Tongue, Chidi Kwubiri, celebrated Nigerian Diasporan contemporary artist, takes us on a visual journey back into the memory map, were finally able to draw from to communicate our unique impressions of the world around us. She painstakingly taught us language, culture and history, which we in turn, by following and learning our family’s unique verbal map, were finally able to draw from to communicate our unique impressions of the world around us.

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Chidi’s politically charged, conceptual sculptures, that are seemingly comical and intriguing, and on closer scrutiny, deliver a provocative cipher, we finally see the powerful message of each piece. It is in Chidi’s subtlety and also in his courageous symbols and unique artistic consciousness. As we step closer to marvel at his technique, and then step back, to get a clearer sense of the forms we are trying to de-

Chidi’s canvases deliver broad statements of the ebb and flow of societal tension set against the ultimate rise of the human spirit. In “compassion”, we see two bold figures in arm-embrace engulfed in a tranquil blue world, which is expertly juxtaposed to “circumcision”, in which a young girl stares at us in silent defiance. Her red anger against an unjust world is broken by a simple string of green beads crowning her head, from which hangs an exposed razor blade. The inno- citious Heat and tension in “circumcision” and the tranquil blue peaceful of “compassion”, show us an artist who uses color to make strong statements. In “echo”, Chidi reminds us of his igbo heritage as he beckons the art community to engage with his work. He presents the silhouette of a man playing a traditional Igbo trumpet (nenke or mkpi-ogbo) made from a curvaceous wild buffalo horn which is used in igbo culture to announce the beginning of special rites and social happenings such as marriages or funerals, or to announce breaking news or an emergency to the community. “Enenke and ogbo trumpets are so mystically powerful they can move people to joy or rage, solemnity or mirth, unity or segregation. They are sensational, and can influence, intoxicate and brutalize when applied in certain social commitments.” Through “echo” and other paint drip works, we observe how Chidi’s mastery of poignant under-statement through keen observation and artistic do-

The second part of Mother Tongue consists of Chidi’s “writings on the wall” and “in the wood” works in which he introduces us to a world of total abstraction. We feel the artist depart from control and precision, to unleash his paint brush boldly and fearlessly. Splashes, drips, swishes of color zip through the landscape in an intense fury. But yet again, Chidi succeeds in hiding mask like faces within the apparent color chaos, reminding us that the more we look at something, the more we see.

The symbolism of “emptiness in the midst of abundance” is direct and clear. We are reminded of society’s superlative abundance which shoots from the empty hollowness of a nation in which the masses are engulfed in poverty. The “table has been set” with sufficient resources for everyone, but only a few are called to “chop”. What is left is the hollow, jagged, empty “left overs” from a rich banquet.

The final part of Mother Tongue explores the conversation pieces, the installations that showcase mundane, quotidian objects which the artist has rearranged in provocative new ways. In “emptiness in the midst of abundance” we see two chairs and a table, on which Chidi has plastered a multitude of empty paint containers, cutlery and paint brushes that draw us into a frenzied, jagged and spiked, chaotic, unruly and seemingly bizarre table setting. This setting has extended from the table and engulfed the seats of the two chairs, making it impossible for anyone to “sit down at the table of brotherhood”.

I trust that as you wander through Mother Tongue, you enjoy the layers of Chidi’s artistic memory and experimentation. I hope you feel the inspiration and fullness of life that touch the very essence of the human spirit in his canvases; that you step through this layer into the rising abstraction and colorful abandon in his “writings on the wall”, and enjoy arriving in his “Alice in Wonderland” landscape, in which objects appear inverted and distorted in an effort to deliver a strong social critique.

We sincerely thank our sponsors, First Hydrocarbon Nigeria Ltd., Helen Ogunbiyi, the Global Energy Group, Elalan Construction Company (Nig.) Ltd. and the Goethe Institut, for supporting Chidi on his artistic journey for many years, and for making this exhibition possible through their generous contributions.

Welcome to Mother Tongue!

Sandra Mbaechu Osisiaga
Exhibition Curator

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inspiration - 2012 - acrylic on canvas - 200 x 100 cm
circumcision - 2011 - acrylic on canvas - 180 x 180 cm
cape of good hope II - 2011 - acrylic on canvas - 150 x 125 cm
A traveler between worlds

There are many “Nigerian artists” and, of course, even more “African artists”, many of whom do exceptional work and have made significant contributions to the field of art in their home country. The art historical relevance of the works of Nigerian artists is indisputable. Nevertheless, in most cases they remain Nigerian artists, whose works revolve around specifically African themes and issues and are in fact intended first and foremost for a Nigerian, or in the best case African, audience. When, however, one speaks of the works of Chidi Kwubiri, it soon becomes clear that one is participating in an altogether different dialogue – a dialogue that is not limited to Nigerian or even African culture, but which includes and embraces a European and indeed global Weltanschauung. Chidi Kwubiri is thus much more than a “Nigerian artist” – he is something much greater than that, namely an artist. And the language of art is universal.

Kwubiri was born and raised in Umuahia, a small town in southeastern Nigeria. When he came to Germany in the early 1990s to study under Michael Buthe at the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf, the sum of the encounter also brought with it a sum of personal identity. For with this move, which, for a young artist from Africa, was indeed literally groundbreaking, he gave up his identity as a “Nigerian artist” to become an “artist from Nigeria”. It is question of simple semantics, whereby one should not be thrown off by the word “simple”. Chidi Kwubiri is an artist, whose work is informed in part by his personal experiences of his own native culture in Africa – as much as is from his experiences in Europe in general, and specifically in Germany and the Rhineland. The time spent at the Academy in Düsseldorf, especially the fateful first year, as a student of this enigmatic, almost shamanistic painter and sculptor Michael Buthe, was to have a lasting effect on the young artist from Nigeria. Unfortunately, Buthe died in November 1994, leaving Kwubiri as a kind of student-orphán, who later transferred to the class of R. Penck, whereby the two artists never really spoke the same language. With Buthe, it was very different – extremely intense and “from the heart”, as it were. The fact that Buthe’s studio in Cologne was located in a former electric-transformer station says a great deal about the energy that the literally poured into his works, which were influenced to a large extent by his extended sojourns in Marrakesh, where he maintained a second studio.

Like his professor, Chidi Kwubiri is a “traveler between worlds”. His works are informed by his childhood and youth in his home village in Nigeria and trips to the big city of Lagos; equally significant and influential are, however, the years spent at the Academy in Düsseldorf, as well as his adopted home in Pulheim, a suburb of Cologne. His works are characterized by his own unique and dynamic style of drip painting that is as far away from Jackson Pollock as it is from Australian Aborigine art – although it is indeed quite close to the mystical works of Michael Buthe. Yet Kwubiri is by no means derivative. He is an “epigone” in the most positive sense of the word: a descendant, an heir, someone who carries on the tradition – but in his own unique and individual way. He combines the abstract, semi-in-tone surface structure created by the emphatic sprinkling of acrylic paint on large format canvases with perfectly defined, static figures that border on photorealism. Expressive energy is thus brought together – not juxtaposed – with controlled intellectualism and skilled craftsmanship. His working method best reflects his own complex personality, which oscillates between his African heritage and his new life as an internationally active artist living in Germany.

Of the many large-scale paintings completed within the past few years, Kwubiri’s “Circumcision” is perhaps the most telling when it comes to his very special position between various worlds. Here, within an undefined space of blood red paint sprinkles, the viewer is confronted with the image of a young Nigerian woman, who, with huge, glassy eyes, gazes over her shoulder, leaning slightly towards the viewer, as if to whisper a secret, perhaps to the eyes of the viewer. Such a mood is rare in Kwubiri’s oeuvre, in fact the artist’s works are otherwise largely positivist and uplifting. Here, however, as in his humanitarian work against corporal punishment in Nigerian schools, we see his unique and new artistic horizons that have no place in contemporary society. Around the top of her shaved head, the young woman wears a chain of coiled beads, from which a double-sided razor blade hangs down at the level of her eyes. The instrument, the weapon, of ritual genital mutilation is thus worn like a lucky charm on a young girl’s charm bracelet or as a long tie worn by members of the military or that tied into a provocative pendant, such as the safety pins and spikes worn by punks throughout Europe. The meaning is thus dependent upon the independent standpoints and personal experiences of the viewers themselves – the artist provides no additional information to help the viewers along.

The perfect symbiosis of African and European art traditions is manifest in Kwubiri’s sculptural works and installations, which take the form of stereotypical African tribal art that are constructed from modern European canvases for painting and painting in two forms of ornament: one corporeal, the other intellectual. With “Emptiness in the midst of Abundance”, he presents a table and two chairs, whereby their function as a place where people come together for a meal or to exchange ideas is negated by the seemingly wild and uncontrollable eruption of paintbrushes and cutlery, as well as recycled yoghurt and pudding cups which the artist uses to mix paints. There is no place to sit, no table to eat from, and the cacophony of the colors and objects makes dialog nearly impossible. Indeed, all that is left is “Emptiness in the midst of Abundance”. One can see the writing on the wall and you do not have to be an artist against world hunger to understand what the artist’s message here could be.

Kwubiri’s abstract works also walk that thin line between Africa and Europe, partaking in both cultural heritages. The dynamic brushstrokes recall the works of the abstract pioneers of Art Informel in France and Germany of the post-war years – artists who were to become the precursors of younger painters such as A.R. Penck and Gerhard Richter. The drips and sprinkles of paint can be read as a kind of homage to Michael Buthe, but all the more so when one slowly discerns the form of a face or a mask, that gradually emerges out of the otherwise abstract composition. On Buthe’s travels throughout North Africa, Nigeria, Egypt and Iran, he came into contact with religions and cultures in which art is no illustration but rather an expression of mystical scrutiny, as well as an integral part of everyday life. It is this aspect of Buthe’s work that Kwubiri picks up on in his “Writings on the Wall” series. As a child, he was fascinated by the arbitrary patterns that emerged from the cracks in the dried mud walls of the house in which he grew up. In some cases, it seemed as though faces or masks were revealing themselves to him. His childhood fantasy was ignited and the simple cracks became mysterious, enigmatic figures with a life of their own. It is this knowledge that has given assurance today that all interpretations lie in the hands of the viewers themselves. Our respective cultural background informs and determines not only how we see and interpret the world around us, but also what we see in the first place: merely cracks in dried mud or signs and hints of stories that transport us to other places. The same is true of contemporary art in general. Like Buthe, Kwubiri does not merely apply paint to canvas or paper, but rather transforms it into something with an emotional force, which allows the image to come to life before our eyes. At the same time, he does not create art as something special and separate from everyday life, but rather as an integral component of it. As a traveler between worlds, Chidi Kwubiri is the perfect tour guide through the fascinating realm of contemporary art between cultures. The journey is fascinating and the stories told are never-ending.

Gérald A. Goethals
Director ART COLOGNE 2003 - 2008
writings on the wall
writings on the wall I - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm

writings on the wall VIII - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm
writings on the wall VI - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm

writings on the wall IV - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm
writings on the wall VII - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm

writings on the wall II - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm
writings on the wall III - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm

writings on the wall V - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm
full of life - 2012 - acrylic on canvas - 140 x 180 cm
fingers crossed - 2013 - acrylic on canvas - 120 x 200 cm
compassion - 2013 - acrylic on canvas - 200 x 150 cm
A studio visit, at Walzwerk in Pulheim near Cologne: a space bathed in light, with large-format paintings hanging on the walls. The floor bears witness to the last dripping-technique session, and a fire is crackling in the fireplace. Chidi Kwubiri has only recently returned to his childhood home in Pulheim after preparing for his upcoming exhibition, ‘Mother Tongue’, in the metropolises of Lagos, Nigeria. 'We are all in this world to make a positive change' (2011), presents a multi-layered critique of the emerging global economic crisis, throw-away society, exploitation and injustice. The tilted table illustrates the imbalance of the economy. ‘Things are falling down’, or, as Kwubiri puts it, ‘things fall apart’. Whereas the calm is not always peaceful. It is interrupted by the vibrating whirr of the points of colour, distracting the beholder who is then catapulted back into the present by a seemingly protuberant razor blade, or by a painter’s brush that serves as a weapon. This is the subtle method Kwubiri uses to problematise themes drawn from his Nigerian surroundings, themes universal at the same time, such as violence against women as in the case of female circumcision, or violence by force of arms. It was also with this same motivation that he installed the artists’ project ‘whip not child’, in opposition to violence against children, to his words: ‘Many people think it’s a culture, but it’s not a culture, it’s a crime.’ His brush is his weapon in this fight; an arrow pointing at the problem. He himself is modest in describing his involvement: ‘We are all in this world to make a positive change.’

This is why Kwubiri’s works also feature homages to figures who have changed the world, such as Nelson Mandela and Nigerian music legend Fela Kuti – portraits that also mirror back to Kwubiri’s beginnings as an artist in the north of Nigeria.

In contrast to the frequently reserved-looking figures of the dripping technique, at first glance the series entitled ‘writings on the wall’ (2013) seem abstract and at the same time much more animated. In fact, the series is not abstract; instead, it takes its examples from the mud walls of the houses of Kwubiri’s childhood. And looking very closely, one notices the hidden faces he saw in the cracks in the mud walls as a young boy. As Kwubiri himself notes, to him art is his ‘mother tongue’, his way of communicating. In contrast to the motif-based paintings planned in advance using the dripping technique, the motifs found in ‘writings on the wall’ are seemingly unconsciously, unintentionally emerging from the painter’s recollections – like Kwubiri’s third series of works, the sculptures that take shape only as the work progresses.

Here – and very much in the style of recycling art popular among contemporary African artists – Kwubiri uses simply everything: work shoes, cutlery, even the yogurt cups in which the paints for the other two art styles are mixed. His installation, ‘emptiness in the midst of abundance’ (2011), presents a multi-layered critique of the emerging global economic crisis, throw-away society, exploitation and unjust distribution of food as well as corruption: the cutlery used comes from restaurants that went bankrupt as a result of the global economic crisis. The works are highly aestheticised and radiate a deep, inner calm that carries over to the beholder. Only at second glance does one realise that the calm is not always peaceful. It is interrupted by the vibrating whirr of the points of colour, distracting the beholder who is then catapulted back into the present by a seemingly protuberant razor blade, or by a painter’s brush that serves as a weapon. This is the subtle method Kwubiri uses to problematise themes drawn from his Nigerian surroundings, themes universal at the same time, such as violence against women as in the case of female circumcision, or violence by force of arms. It was also with this same motivation that he installed the artists’ project ‘whip not child’, in opposition to violence against children, to his words: ‘Many people think it’s a culture, but it’s not a culture, it’s a crime.’ His brush is his weapon in this fight; an arrow pointing at the problem. He himself is modest in describing his involvement: ‘We are all in this world to make a positive change.’

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left over - 2013 - mixed technique - 80 x 200 x 9 cm
emptiness in the midst of abundance
2007 - installation - 110 x 260 x 120cm
in the wood
in the wood I - 2012 - acrylic on board - 100 x 23 cm
in the wood II - 2012 - acrylic on board - 100 x 23 cm
in the wood III - 2012 - acrylic on board - 100 x 23 cm
**echo** - 2012 - acrylic on canvas - 100 x 250 cm
in the groove - 2013 - acrylic on canvas - 200 x 300 cm
My first experience of Africa was being deposited in British Airways left luggage in Murtala Mohamed Airport, Lagos, an unclaimed and unaccompanied minor. Sits amongst the luggage and chaos, Lagos assaulted my senses: heat radiating off red earth and tarmac, verbal jostling in a maze of languages, and most exciting of all, colour. Its density, variety and texture changed everything I saw. This, my first impression of Nigeria, is strongly brought back to me when I look at Chidi Kwubiri’s paintings. His ability to diffuse his subject through the application of layers of dots of paint, each dot of pure colour perfectly calculated in its juxtaposition to another, to bring an almost ethereal effect of light. His subjects are drawn from the rich culture and traditions of Nigeria and his background. He invites us to glimpse at this heritage and, by partially obscuring our view, draws us into the canvas, hinting at the mystery behind the subject and making his audience search the canvas for ways to discover more. Just as heat hitting the vibrant red earth in Nigeria creates a mirage of the environment, and people are vaporous during the rainy season, so are his subjects. Whilst Kwubiri is highly acclaimed for his work in this genre, in this exhibition we are exposed to some new elements. In his series ‘writings on the wall’ and ‘in the wood’ the dabs of pure colour are used to decorative effect and the stroke of the palette knife creates a veil, masking these haunting, mask-like figures that seem to appear and then disappear. The artist’s love of colour and drama is apparent in all these works, and it is with great excitement that I look forward to seeing this body of work all together in this the country of his artistic origin.

Helen Ogunbiyi
Collector – Art Consultant
Africa Acquisitions Committee of The Tate Museum, London
biography

born 1966 in Umuahia/Nigeria - working and living near Cologne/Germany - studio: WALZWERK Pulheim
studied in fine arts (painting) at the Art Academy of Düsseldorf (1993 – 2002) with Prof. Michael Buthe (†) and Prof. A.R. Penck (MA of Fine Art [Meisterschüler])

exhibitions and projects (selection)
(s = solo exhibition)
2013 - “conversion”, Galerie am Brüsseler Platz, Cologne/Germany (s)
- articolon, Lagos, Nigeria (also 2008 - 2012)
- Terra Kulture, Lagos/Nigeria
2012 - paragon gallery, Miami/USA
2011 - “crisscross”, Lagos, Nigeria
2010 - “Africa at 50”, Nigerian Embassy and Deutsche Bank, Berlin
- “theme Africa”, Phillips de Pury, New York/USA
“face to face”, Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), Bonn, Germany (s)
2009/11 - “whip not child”, art project against violence on children (initiator) in co-operation with “Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ)” and Goethe Institute, Germany
2009 - OPERA Gallery Paris, France
2008 - “reflection”, Signature Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria (s)
- Millenia Fine Art, Orlando, Florida/USA
2007 - Goethe-Institute, Dusseldorf, Germany
- Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), Eschborn, Germany (also 2001)
2006 - World Market Center, Las Vegas, USA
- ArtAlternatives for Visual Arts (Hutt), Cape Town, South Africa (s)
- Gallery ACHT PPRAIATO, Bonn, Germany (s), (also in 1999)
- Gallery CITF, Düsseldorf, Germany (s) (also in 2003, 2002 and 1997)
2005 - “back to the roots”, Goethe Institute Lagos, Nigeria (s)
- International Art Fair “Palm Beach Contemporary”, Palm Beach, Florida, USA
- Künstlerische Rheinischen Brauweiler Abbey, Germany (also in 2002 and 2001)
2004 - “The Internationals”, Millenia Gallery, Orlando, Florida, USA
- Collection National Museum, Tivat, Montenegro
- “Second Independent International Biennial of Graphic in St. Petersburg”, Russia
- “Holland Art Fair”, The Hague, The Netherlands
2003 - international art fair “LINEART” (Gallery DE OPSTEKER), Ghent, Belgium
- “Artists from Germany”, CHURCH STREET GALLERY, Orlando, Florida, USA
2001 - CHURCH STREET GALLERY, Orlando, Florida, USA (s)
- Landtag Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany
2000 - UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France
1999 - Kosher Bank (two artists), Cologne, Germany (s)
- Dr. Georg Haar Foundation, European Art Capital 1999 WEimar, Germany
1998 - project, “ConverArt”, BICC (Bonn International Center for Conversion)
- Westfälisches Landesmuseum Münster, Germany
- Art MULTIPLEX, Düsseldorf, Germany
- GALLERY XENIOS, Frankfurt/Main, Germany (s)
several art sponsorship awards in 1996, 1997, 2007
special thanks

Alex Nader
Andrea A. Geday
Avinash D. Wadhwani
Helen and Labi Ogunbiyi
Kabir D. Wadhwani
Laurence LO Chataigne
Marc-André Schmachtel
Moses Foster
Sandra and Joe Obiago
Steve Britt
Rainer Naumann
Rüdiger Schmidt-Holzmann

also to my wife, Henrike, and my sons
for their steadfast love and support

and above all, to God almighty for the life
and the uncountable blessings...
EL-ALAN’s success and reputation today are built on the consistent delivery of dynamic construction companies in Nigeria. EL-ALAN has since then delivered high quality inte-
Sponsors
First Hydrocarbon Nigeria Ltd. (FHN) is committed to supporting the celebration and development of Nigerian art and culture and believes that the natural creativity and innovation of Nigeria’s people is core to our future development, both artistically and commercially. Nigeria’s artistic and cultural strength continues to evolve, combining a willingness to embrace new and modern approaches, with a clear recognition of the value and inspiration of our past. Our art sits at the forefront of a fast evolving African artistic renaissance, while our music and films continue expanding their sphere of influence and attract wider and wider audiences across the continent and beyond. FHN’s support for the arts spurs our CEO’s founding role in the first Contemporary African Masters Exhibition in London in 2007, through to our support for Bonham’s African Art Auctions, our work with the legendary Afrobeat collective Fela Agra and our celebration of Nigeria’s cultural development through our support for the publication ‘Five.’

Global Energy Group (GEC) is an Africa focused independent Energy Resources Corporation. GEC operates with a mission to explore, harness and produce a variety of energy resources in a sustainable manner that enhances the wealth of our host nations and the quality of life of the peo-
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