

Press Release

Women of the Elephant Tusk as a symbol of African female empowerment and cultural cohesion.

(Embargoed, until September 5, 2024. Lagos, Nigeria) *Women of the Elephant Tusk*, an exhibition of powerful portraits of traditional matriarchs by REWA, opens at the Africa Center in London on September 8th, 2024. Curated by SMO Contemporary Art, the works celebrate century old systems of African feminism and leadership, coinciding with Black History month in the UK, and the Africa Center's 60th anniversary.

Women of the Elephant Tusk is an exhibition of eight large scale paintings by REWA, a rising global visual artist, who traces the story of initiation into the Otu Odu female chieftancy group in Onitsha, eastern Nigeria. Through the artists' two year exploration of family history and archival materials, researching intimate narratives about the roles and experiences of members of Otu Odu, REWA shares a compelling story of how traditional women leaders in her hometown, have safeguarded profound traditional knowledge systems and values.

"The Otu Odu women serve as guardians of Igbo customs, a beacon of tradition dating back to the 16th century. The very name, Odu, meaning elephant tusk, encapsulates the majesty and reverence bestowed on its members, who proudly wear ivory tusks (or ivory replicas in modern times) as symbols of their identity and status," explained REWA in her artist statement. "The stories and triumphs of my grandmothers and aunts, esteemed members of the Otu Odu society, are a mainstay of this body of work. Like the tusks themselves, they embodied strength, wisdom, and resilience."

The exhibition's cover image, *The Elder and the Chaperone*, shows a young girl carrying a large umbrella, shielding a seated elder adorned with rich traditional textiles, from the sun. The umbrella becomes a powerful metaphor which speaks to the artist's intention of protecting these sacred stories from being lost.

REWA's portraits reflect the tight relational bonds within culturally diverse communities. Her bold use of color within a complex web of geometric shapes, giving a stained glass effect, reflect her artistic sensitivity and depth of expression. The portrait of her British maternal grandmother, who was a proud member of the society, reveals a wonderful diversity of cultures within African traditional societies.

REWA's paintings take us on an intimate journey of inspiration and initiation, connecting ancient social influencers with contemporary women's groups in Nigeria and within Onitsha communities in the Diaspora. It is a story of pride and female empowerment.

“Otu Odu is the highest cultural and social society for Onitsha women. The members are well accomplished in their respective vocations in life and are the shining examples for womanhood in the community. They are fondly referred to as *women of influence and affluence*”, commented His Majesty, Nnaemeka A. Achebe, CFR, mni, the Obi of Onitsha. “By this exhibition, REWA has earned her place of honour on the distinguished list of Onitsha visual artists of international repute, including Professors Ben Enwonwu, Oseloka Osadebe, and Okechukwu Odita of the earlier generations, and Emma Mbanefo, George Nwadiogbu, Ato Arinze, Oliver Enwonwu and George Edozie of the present generation.”

“The Otu Odu society embodies the spirit of communalism, women's participation in economic activities, maintenance of social order of the society, and preservation of ancient and age-long tradition,” said Professor Gloria Chuku, Chair of Africana Studies, University of Maryland, Baltimore, USA. “REWA's art is a celebration of Onitsha, Igbo, Nigerian, and African womanhood, strength, resilience, grace, and elegance; it covers such themes as power, identity, fashion, ornamentation, political authority, community, family, Africanness, Blackness, race, ethnicity, women's role and agency, history, and contemporary experiences.”

“Through exhibitions like this, we not only safeguard our cultural artifacts but also ensure that the stories, values, and wisdom of our people continue to inspire and empower us all,” said Obi Asika (Ojinnaka), Director General of the National Council for Arts and Culture Nigeria (NCAC). “Women of the Elephant Tusk” is not just an exhibition; it is a celebration of our identity and an affirmation of our shared heritage.”

“At a time when the United Kingdom has experienced one of the worst summers of racial tension in modern history, this exhibition is a perfect way to usher in Black History Month,” explained Sandra Mbanefo Obiago, the exhibition curator and Founder of SMO Contemporary Art. “It reminds us of the natural integration of the artist's British grandmother within post-independence Nigeria, despite the painful history of colonial rule. The Otu Odu women ensured there was acceptance and friendship between all members of society.”

“My work seeks to empower women while fostering a deeper understanding of Igbo culture and its enduring legacy,” concluded the artist. “My goal is to celebrate African heritage and provoke thought and dialogue about the social significance and historical narratives that shape our identities today.”

The exhibition will be at the Africa Center in London until the end of September 2024, before returning home to Nigeria.

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For more information, contact Taiwo at SMO Contemporary Art, info@smocontemporaryart

About The Artist

REWA is a globally celebrated visual artist whose heritage-inspired art has been featured in fairs, museum and gallery exhibitions across Africa, Asia, Europe and North America. Her works have been part of group exhibitions at ReLe Gallery; the Gallery of African Art (GAFRA) in London; the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA) in New York; Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town; Jonathan Ferrara Gallery in New Orleans; the Contemporary Art Centre New Orleans (CACNO); the Nigerian National Museum; Band Of Vices Gallery in Los Angeles; DeBuck Gallery and Urban Zen Gallery in New York; Out Of Africa Gallery in Barcelona. She also has been a part of virtual group exhibitions with Artsy, CasildART and the UK Government. Her work has been shown at several renowned art fairs including Art Miami, Art Expo Chicago, Art Market San Francisco and Art Dubai. She has worked with global brands such as Unilever and Nike on campaigns such as the Vaseline Showcase at the 2019 Essence Festival and the 2019 Women's World Cup Nike "Don't Change Your Dream, Change the World" campaign. Her work has been featured on several episodes of Law & Order: Organized Crime, ABC Network's, Black-ish and Oprah Winfrey's OWN "All The Single Ladies"; three hit television shows in the U.S.A. Most recently, six of REWA's artworks were featured in multi-platinum, Grammy award-winning, global superstar, Usher's new music video, Ruin, ahead of his record-breaking half-time performance at the Super Bowl LVIII. Her works have been acquired by notable collectors including Beth Rudin DeWoody, CCH Pounder and the Bentata family and also forms part of corporate collections including AXA XL. Rewa holds a BSc in Physiology and Pharmacology (Combined Honours) from University College London (UCL) and was a recipient of the Women in Management Africa (WIMA) Top 25 Women in Management Award 2024. Rewa was also recently recognised by the Lagos State Governor on International Women's Day (IWD) 2022, as one of the EKO 100 Women - for her commendable work across finance and the visual arts. She has attended executive training programs at leading institutions including Duke University and Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS).

About SMO Contemporary Art

SMO Contemporary Art (SMO) is an international art platform, showcasing a unique portfolio of modern and contemporary art from Africa and the Diaspora to a global audience. Based in Lagos, Nigeria, SMO curates exhibitions, as well as public and private art events of leading and emerging talents for a diverse audience. SMO is dedicated to artists of all generations who have been instrumental in shaping West Africa's contemporary art canon and who became crucial in establishing a unique narrative of the continent. The SMO program sheds light on forgotten talents who have paved the way for new identities in contemporary art while encouraging a vibrant and continuous discourse around their oeuvres. Regular exhibitions at diverse and unconventional gallery spaces, often affiliated to ecosystems of design, fashion and hospitality, underpin SMO's vision to engage with large and heterogenous audiences. The platform curates private and public creative events at international venues, and showcases a dynamic portfolio of contemporary art at local and international fairs. Specialized in art advisory services SMO Contemporary curates and manages important private and corporate art collections with a great commitment to documentation, preservation and communication.
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