

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 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 in to the memory of his mother tongue. We are introduced to a multi-layered, almost opaque world of color and silhouettes that gently seep in to our visual 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 decipher, we finally see the powerful message of each piece. It is in Chidi's subtlety and also in his courageous symbols and unique artistic technique that we celebrate his mastery.

Mother Tongue is a body of work that has three distinct layers of meaning. First we see Chidi's celebrated dripping paint technique on large canvases. The second visual layer are his paper and wood based "writings on the wall". The final layer of *Mother Tongue* showcases Chidi's politically charged, conceptual sculptures, that are seemingly comical and intriguing, and on closer scrutiny, deliver a provocative expose of society.

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 bald figures in warm embrace engulfed in a tranquil blue world, which is expertly juxtaposed vis-a-vis "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 dangles an exposed razor blade. The injustice, heat and tension in "circumcision" and the tranquil blue peace of "compassion", shows 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 (enenke 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, stillness or motion, 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 documentation, has the power to "influence, intoxicate or move us to rage or joy".

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 final part of *Mother Tongue* are the conversation pieces, the sculptures 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. The 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".

The symbolism of "emptiness in the midst of abundance" is direct and clear. We are reminded of society's superlative abundance which shouts 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.

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 of 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.

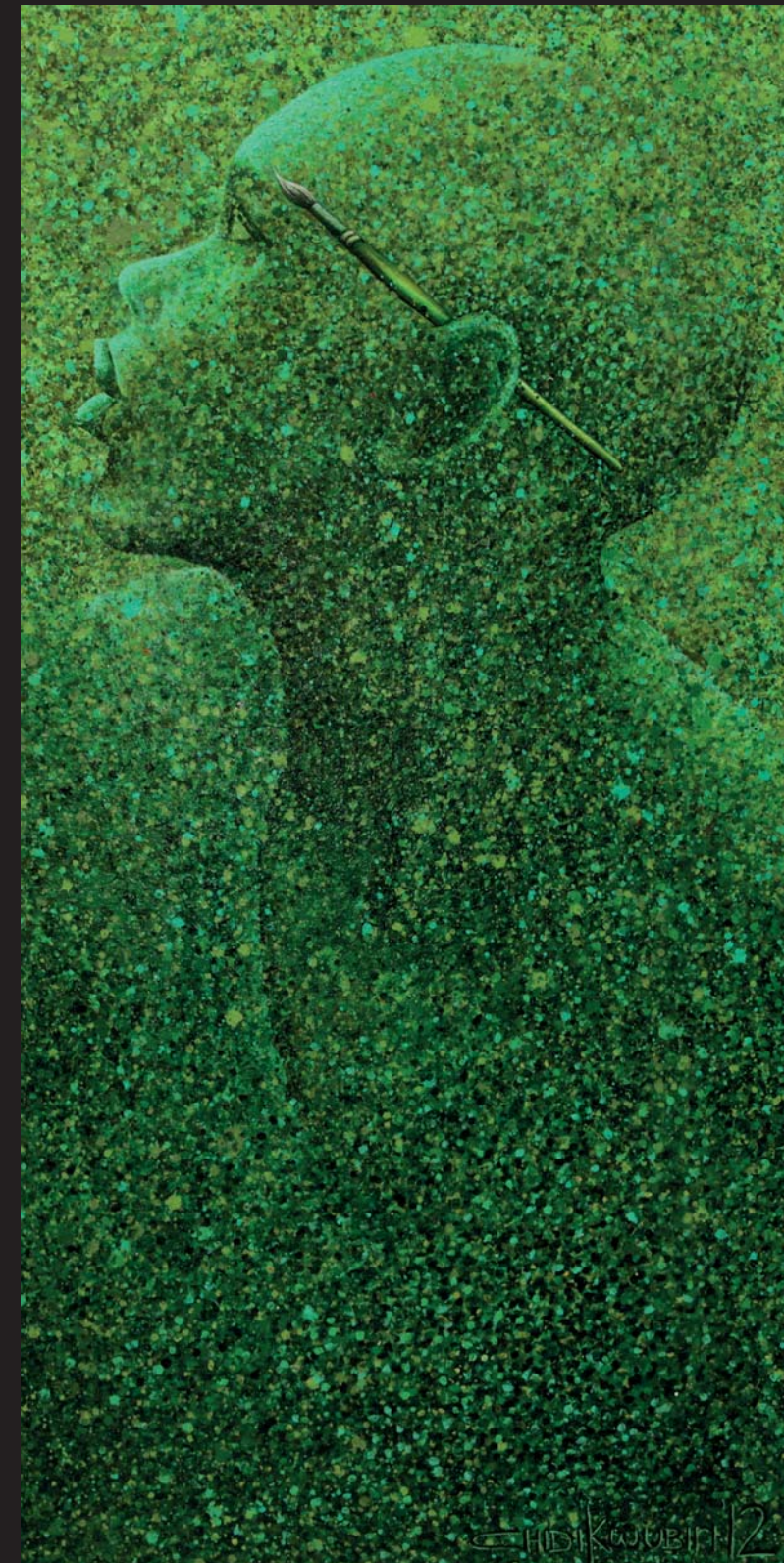
We sincerely thank our sponsors, First Hydrocarbon Nigeria Ltd., Helen Ogunbiyi, the Global Energy Group, Elalan Construction Company (Nig.) Ltd. and the Goethe Institut, for supporting Chidi on his artistic journey for many years, and for making this exhibition possible through their generous contributions.

Welcome to *Mother Tongue*!

Sandra Mbanefo Obiago
Exhibition Curator

¹ The Trumpets: Okike, Odu-mkpalo, and Enenke as Ethnography in Igbo Social Commitments, vol. 6, no. 1, 2009, by Rev. Chris Ebighbo (MFA, M.Phil, Phd), Ann Arbor, MI: MPublishing, University of Michigan Library, 2009

inspiration - 2012 - acrylic on canvas - 200 x 100 cm

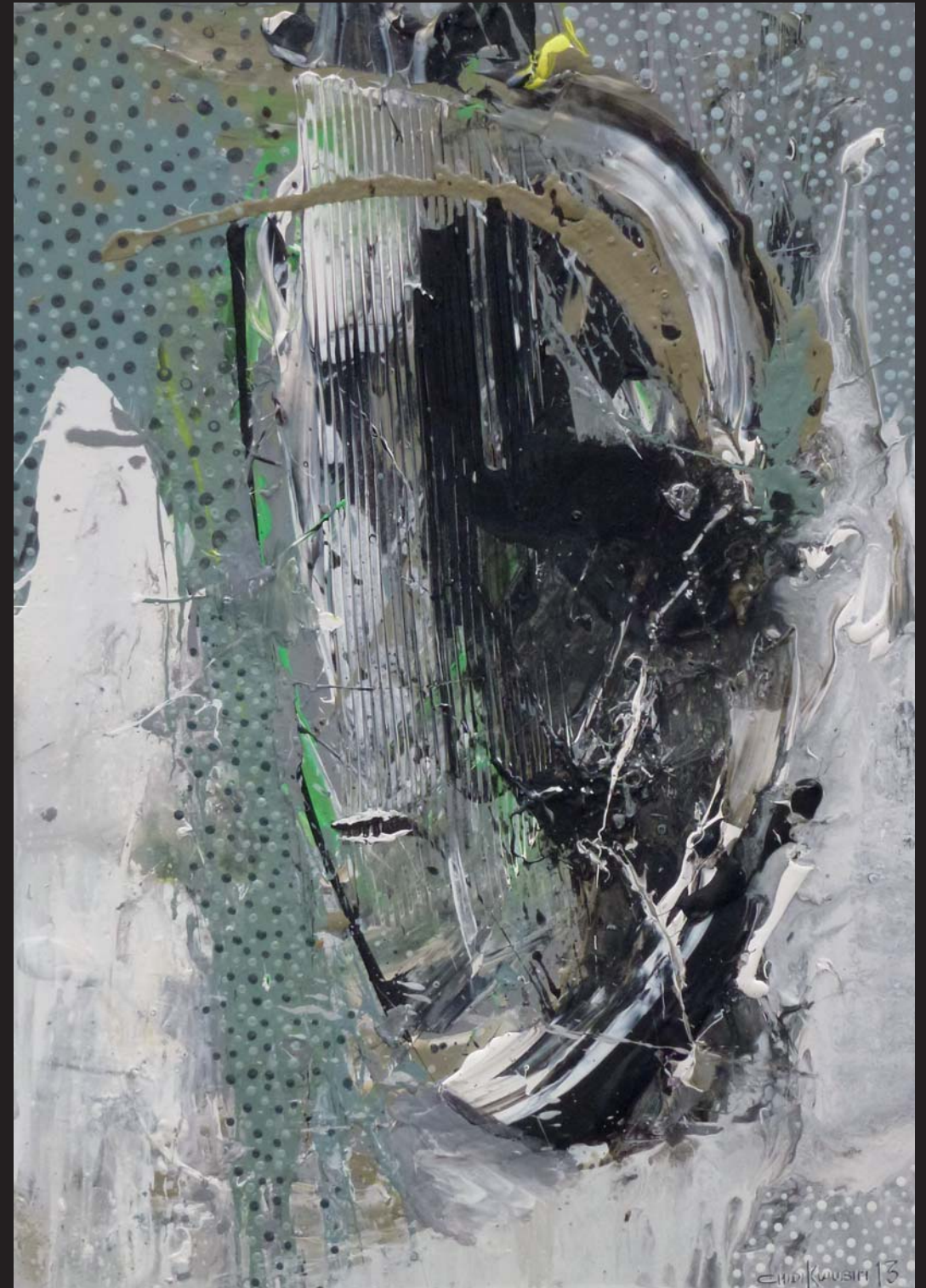


cape of good hope II - 2011 - acrylic on canvas - 150 x 125 cm

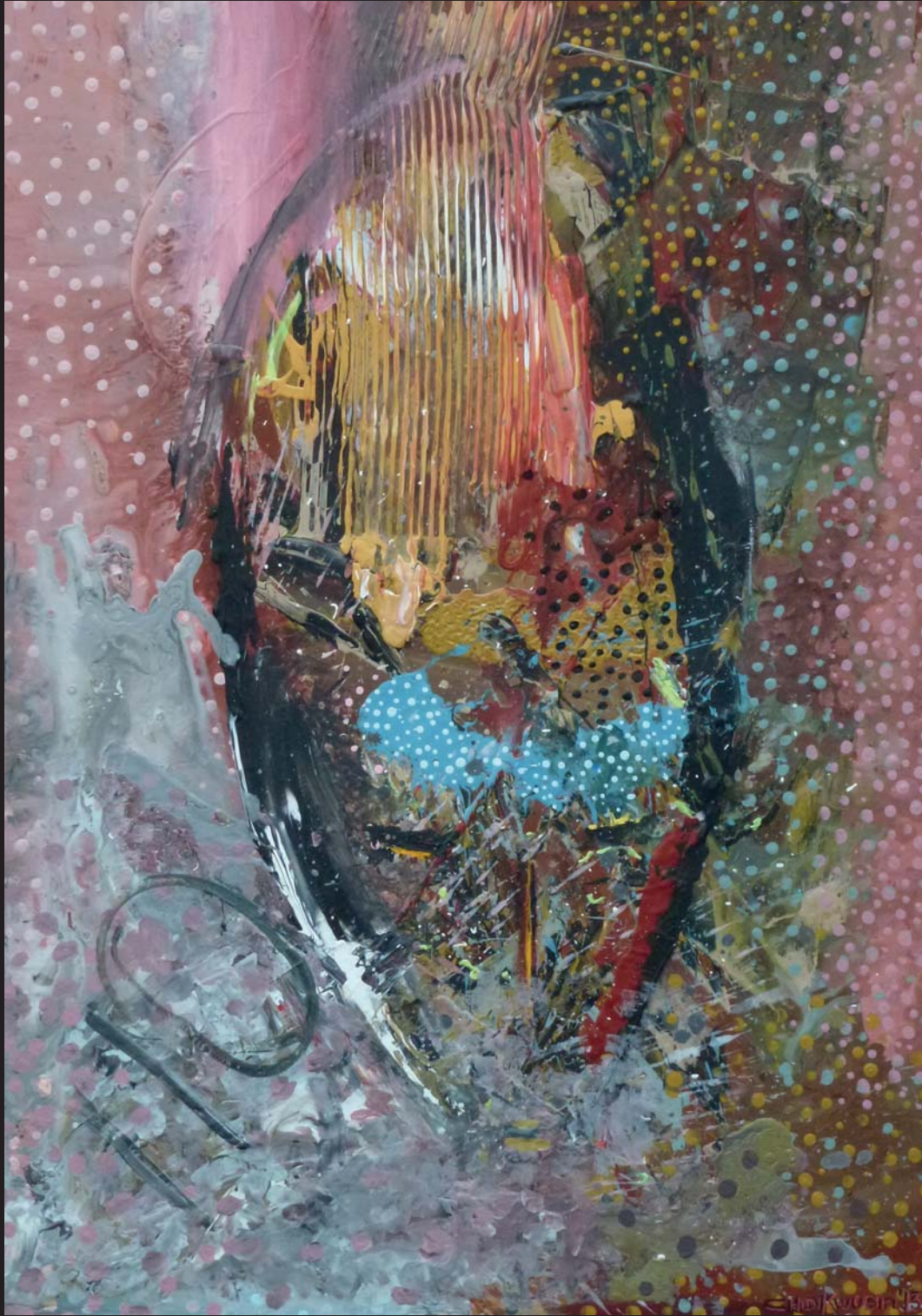




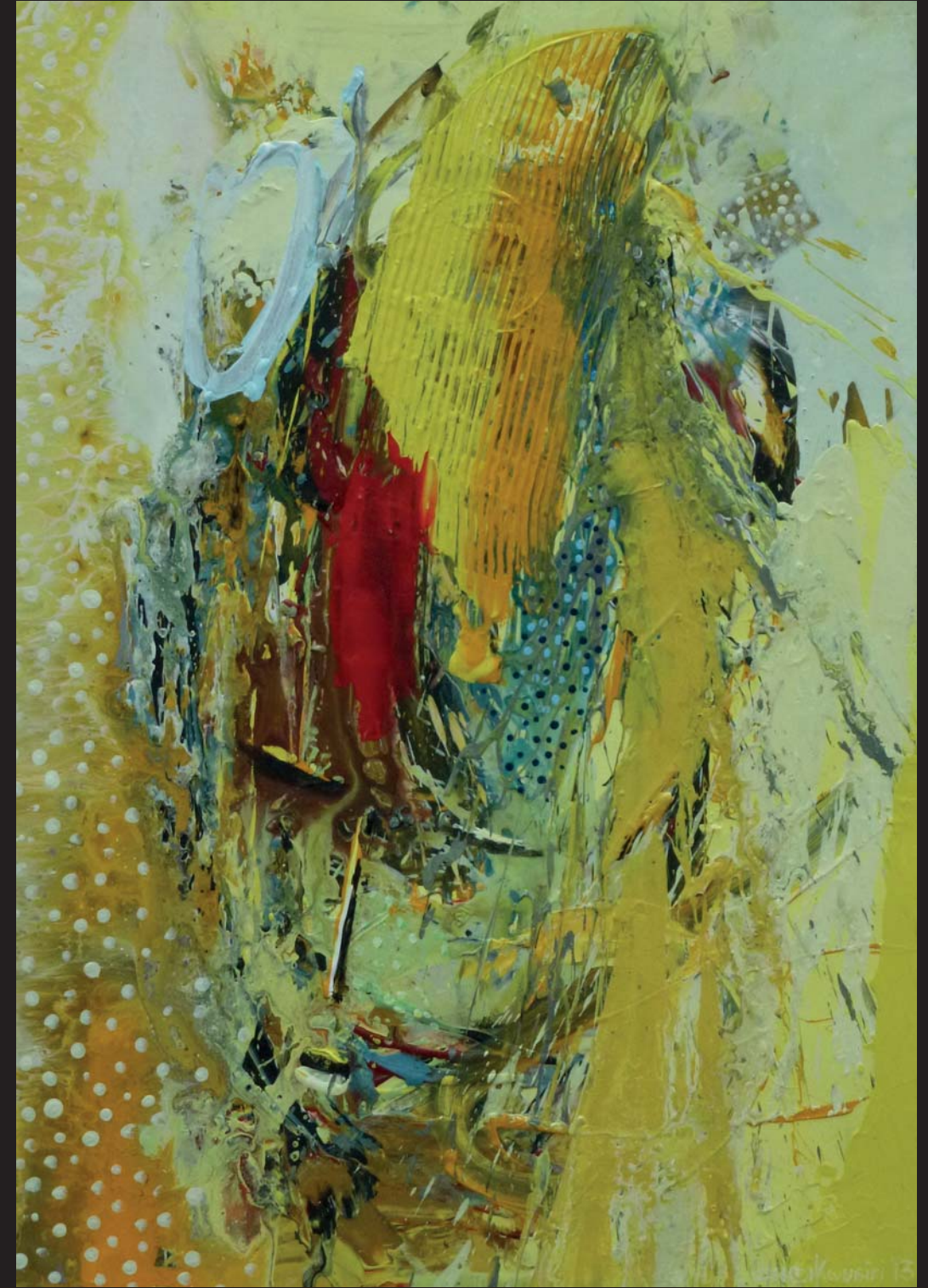
writings on the wall I - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm



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



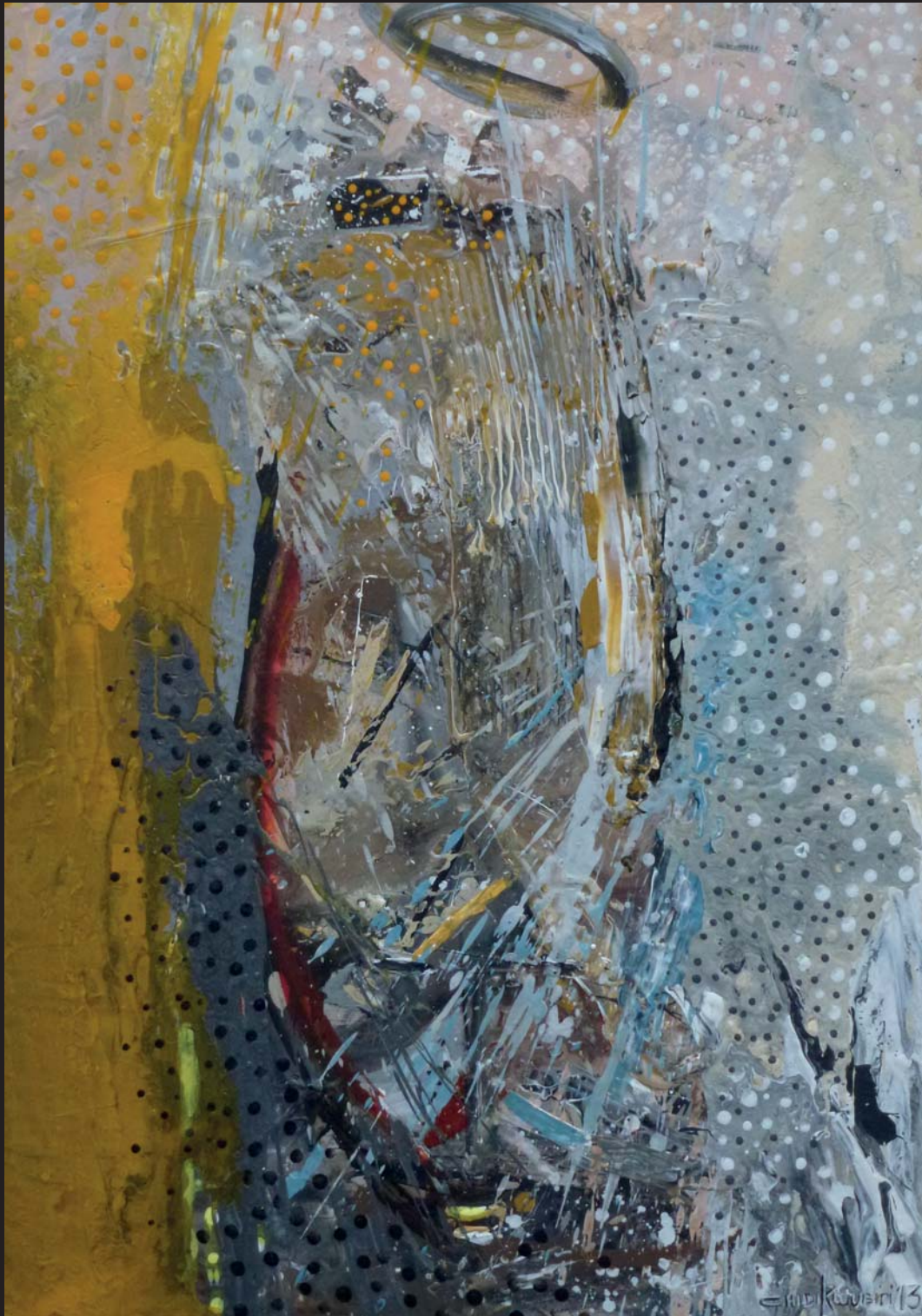
writings on the wall IV - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm



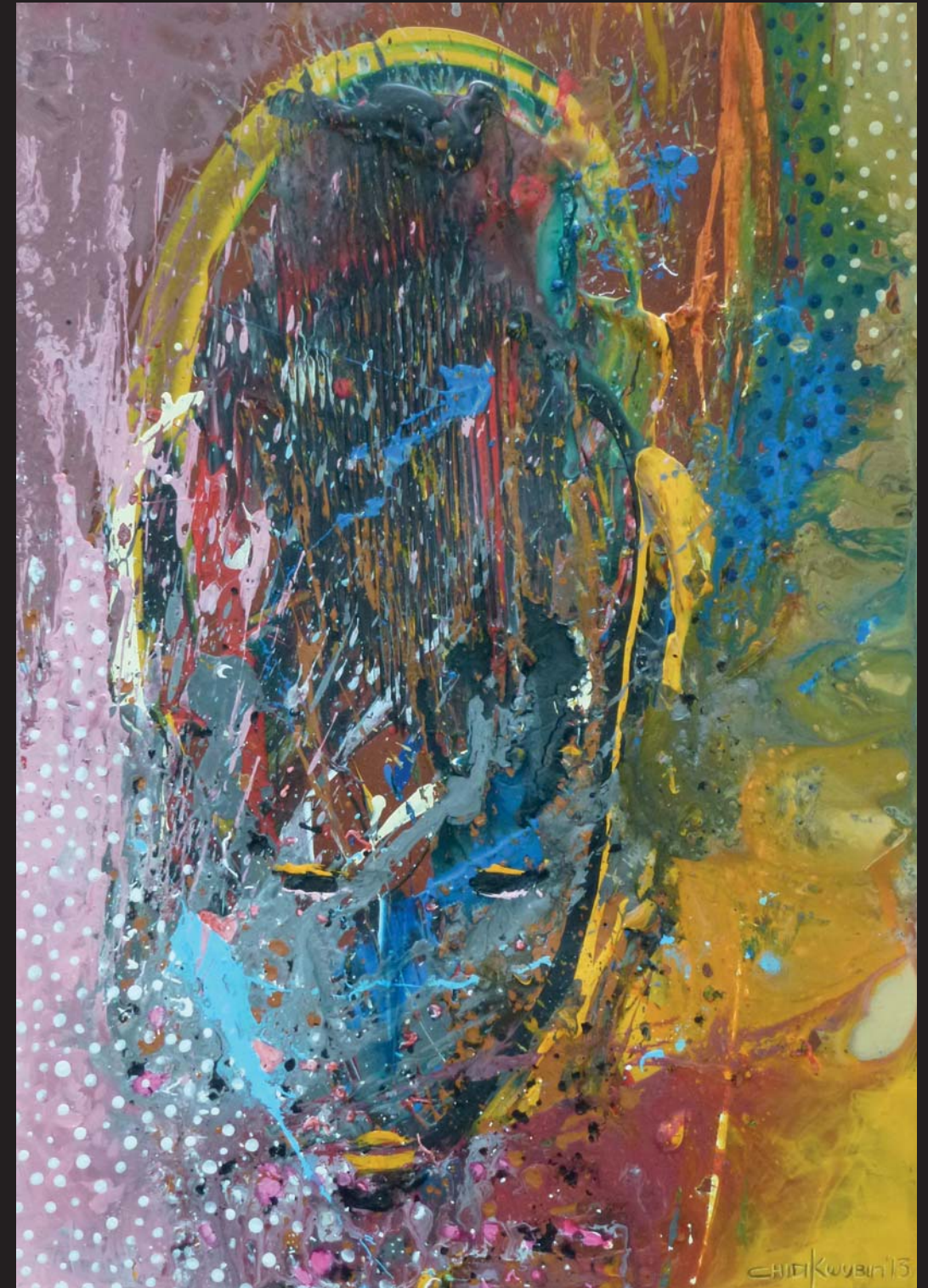
writings on the wall VII - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm



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

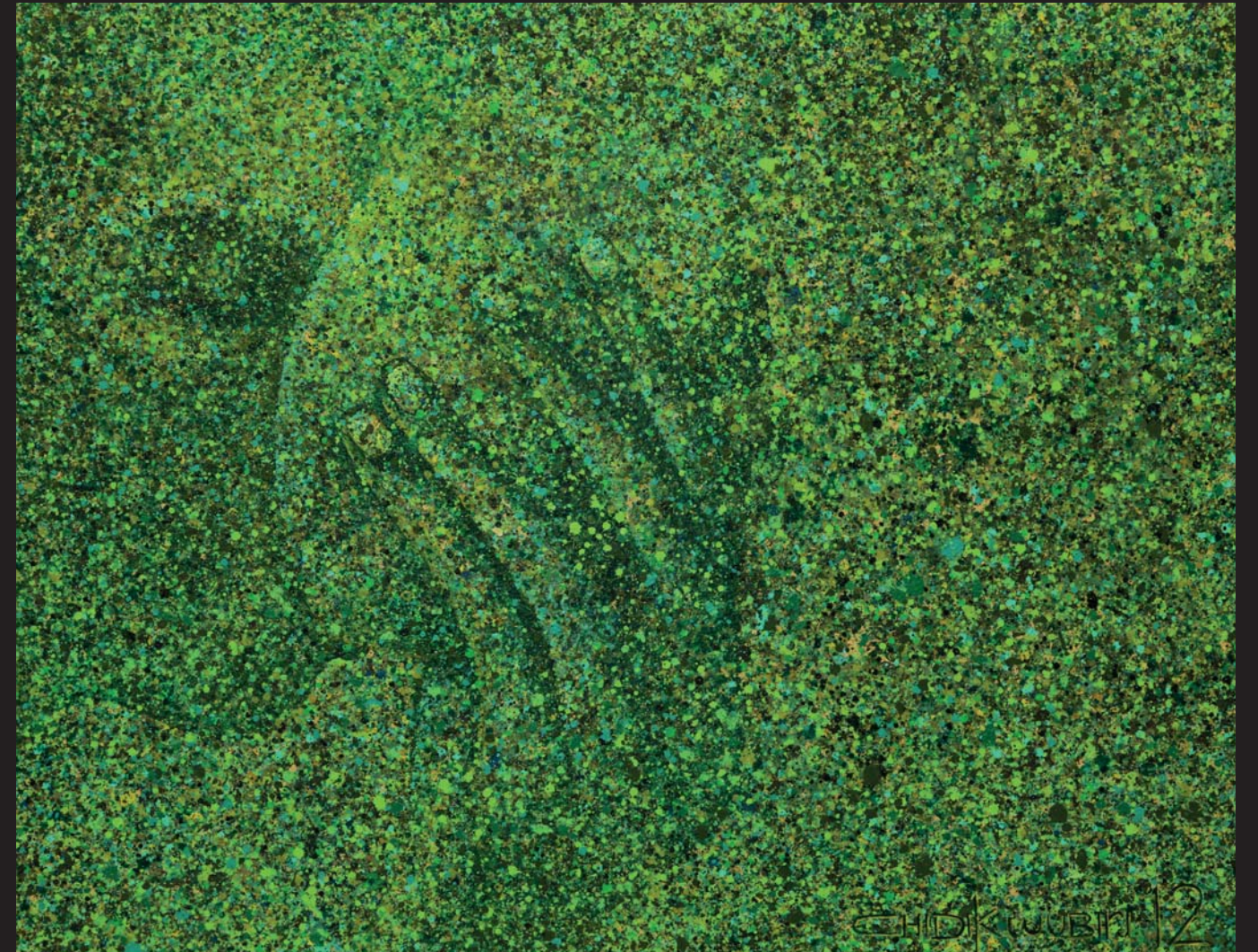


writings on the wall III - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm



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



‘We are all in this world to make a positive change’

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 the peace and quiet of Pulheim after preparing for his upcoming exhibition, ‘Mother Tongue’, in the metropolis of Lagos, Nigeria. Kwubiri speaks German at first but soon switches to English, a language that is at that moment more present to him.

Hanging, standing and leaning throughout the space are works of three quite different styles: from sculptures to abstract paintings to works that display the dripping technique Kwubiri developed during his studies with Michael Buthe and A.R. Penck at the Arts Academy of Düsseldorf. This versatility is reflected in Kwubiri’s art generally but cannot be assigned to any particular period; rather, it represents Kwubiri’s creative moods.

The dripping technique reflected in his large-scale works enables Kwubiri to play with the observer’s perception and lends the works a special depth. The works could be portraits from a timeless-seeming, nostalgic past, nearly surreal, and not reflective of any actual past. ‘To look at my culture from a distance’ was Kwubiri’s idea when he left Nigeria to study in Düsseldorf in 1993. ‘Most of my topics are African, but my style developed during my studies in Germany,’ he adds himself.

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 initiated the artists’ project, ‘whip not child’, in opposition to violence against children. In 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 homage’s to figures who have changed the world, such as Nelson Mandela and Nigerian music legend Fela Kuti – portraits that also hearken 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 unconscious, 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 tilted table illustrates the imbalance of the economy. ‘Things are falling down’, or, as Kwubiri puts it, ‘things fall apart’. Whereas Chinua Achebe’s well-known novel of the same name, published in 1958, alludes to the decline of traditional structures in Nigeria as a result of missionary activity and colonisation, in his works Kwubiri addresses the new problems of globalisation and worldwide economic interdependencies.

Kwubiri is an artist of the postcolonial, an artist of ruptures, contrasts and contradictions: timeless at first glance, his paintings speak to very contemporary themes; his seemingly abstract paintings are actually figured; his motifs are inspired by African-nostalgic flair; his technique, on the other hand, bears the marks of Western influences; he regularly returns to the vibrating city of Lagos to, in his words, ‘down-load’, yet he then returns to Germany where he can process his ideas in the calm of his studio in Pulheim. He is an artist who has lived in Germany for 20 years, and the market for his works could not be more global: his collectors can be found in the USA, in South Africa, Dubai, Brazil and Jamaica, but most of all in his home country of Nigeria. In the exhibition ‘Mother tongue’, audiences there will be seeing many of his works for the first time – a particularly moving moment for Kwubiri. As he points out, ‘It is good to be engaged globally, but to be received and understood by your own people is an additional blessing.’

Dr. Clara Himmelheber (Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Cologne) and Lena Reuter

left over - 2013 - mixed technique - 80 x 200 x 9 cm





chief I - 2013 - installation - 75 x 80 x 17 cm



chief II - 2013 - installation - 75 x 80 x 17 cm

emptiness in the midst of abundance
2007 - installation - 110 x 260 x 120cm



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





CHIDI KWUBIRI

biography

born 1966 in Umuahia/Nigeria - working and living near Cologne/Germany - studio: WALZWERK Pulheim
 studies 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)
 - arthouse, Lagos, Nigeria (also 2008 - 2012)
 - Terra Kulture, Lagos/Nigeria
- 2012 - paragon gallery, Miami/USA
- 2011 - "crosscurrents", Lagos, Nigeria
- 2010 - "Nigeria 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, Nigeria/Germany
- 2009 - OPERA Gallery, Paris, France
- 2008 - "reflection", Signature Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria (s)
 - Millenia Fine Art, Orlando, Florida/USA
- 2007 - Goethe-Institute, Duesseldorf, Germany
 - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), Eschborn, Germany (also 2001)
- 2006 - World Market Center, Las Vegas, USA
 - Association for Visual Arts [AVA], Cape Town, South Africa (s)
 - Gallery ACHT P! PRAVATO, Bonn, Germany (s), (also in 1998)
 - Gallery OTT, 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
 - Kunsttage Rhein-Erft, 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, Duesseldorf, Germany
- 2000 - UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France
- 1999 - Koelner 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 multiple", Düsseldorf, Germany
 - GALLERY XENIOS, Frankfurt/Main, Germany (s)

several art sponsorship awards in 1996, 1997, 2007

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 entertain wider and wider audiences across the continent and beyond. FHN's support for the arts spans 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 Faji Agba and our celebration of Nigeria's cultural development through our support for the publication 'Five.'



Helen Ogunbiyi is an art consultant who has keenly supported Nigerian art since being introduced to it in the early 90's. In 2007 she put together an exhibition 'African Masters' in London's Air Gallery in Mayfair to showcase the works of just a few of the contemporary Ghanaian and Nigerian masters whose careers she had followed. Exhibiting the works of Gabriel Eklou, Ablade Glover, Muraina Oyelami, Sam Ovranti, Rom Issichei and Tola Wewe, to name a few, to huge success. Ogunbiyi has a degree in Art History from University College London and Florence University and assists companies and individuals in building their art collections, while working in close partnership with galleries in Europe and Africa. She is currently serves on the Africa Acquisitions Committee of The Tate Museum, London. Having strived to raise the profile of contemporary African Art overseas, it seemed fitting that she support an exhibition that brings the work of an African artist working in Europe back home.



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 people. GEC as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility over the past two decades, actively supports and promotes Arts, Culture and People Initiatives in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa. GEC aims to nurture, sustain and showcase the best of Africa's immense creative energy with a special focus on the visual arts, dance, drama and theatre.



Founded in April 1982, EL-ALAN Construction Company is one of the fastest growing and most dynamic construction companies in Nigeria. EL-ALAN has since then delivered high quality integrated construction solutions in all renovation and contracting work, through which it quickly gained a name for itself! EL-ALAN's success and reputation today are built on the consistent delivery of quality, speed, efficacy, and overall client satisfaction. The operational and service offering was expended to cater to a wide spectrum of construction need in both the public and private sectors. Its portfolio of work comprised of successful project in residential, commercial and industrial spaces was done with client across all sectors!



The Goethe-Institut is the cultural institute of the Federal Republic of Germany with a global reach. We promote knowledge of the German language abroad and foster international cultural cooperation. We convey a comprehensive picture of Germany by providing information on Germany's cultural, social and political life. Through our network of Goethe-Institutes, Goethe Centers, cultural societies and reading rooms, alongside our examination and language learning centers, we perform the principal tasks of cultural and educational policy abroad. We work in partnership with public and private cultural bodies, the German federal states and municipalities, and the corporate sector. We draw on the rich variety of our many-faceted open society and Germany's lively culture. We combine the experiences and conceptions of our partners in Germany and abroad with our professional skills and engage in a dialogue rooted in partnership. In doing so, we function as service providers and partners for everyone taking an active interest in Germany and the German language and culture, and act independently with no political affiliations. We face the cultural policy challenges of globalization and develop innovative concepts for a world made more human through mutual understanding, where cultural diversity is seen as an asset.



A taste for excellence, the pursuit of perfection, a refusal of ephemeral trends, but also a passion for a particular art form, enthusiasm for innovation and a quest for the beautiful: these are the secrets of the House Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin. Veuve Clicquot instills "Art de Vivre" (art of living) to any occasion, and a preferred taste for the unique and the exceptional. Firmly implanted in the Champagne countryside since 1772, the Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin House is the perfect symbol of the "Art of Living". With more than 515 hectares of vineyards at the heart of one of the greatest Champagne crus, Veuve Clicquot has remained loyal to her watchword: "only one quality, the finest". The Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin House also embodies boldness and modernity to perfection: innovation is the mainstay of its strategic approach, creativity one of its founding values. Finding a certain mood, a pure line, creating a beautiful object based on a wine of exceptional quality...These are the keys of inspiration for creative research at Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin.



"A temple is a sign of purity and a muse invokes inspiration thus temple muse is an abode for pure inspiration"

Having opened its doors in May 2008 Temple Muse is West Africa's leading luxury concept store focusing on designer home & giftware, fashion & accessories as well as art & design. Our strength not only lies in offering the very best of world-renowned brands, but also in nurturing homegrown talent from across the continent. The iconic flagship store equipped with its very own champagne bar is located in the heart of Lagos and possesses a "gallery-like" open feel, where clients can relax & indulge in all things wonderful. Most recently, Temple Muse has hosted a number of specially curated art exhibitions offering its clients cutting edge contemporary art and will soon introduce a new multipurpose design space, 'The Salon', located in the Temple Muse gardens

imprint

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cover picture	left over - 2013 - mixed technique - 80 x 200 x 9 cm