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 p

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.

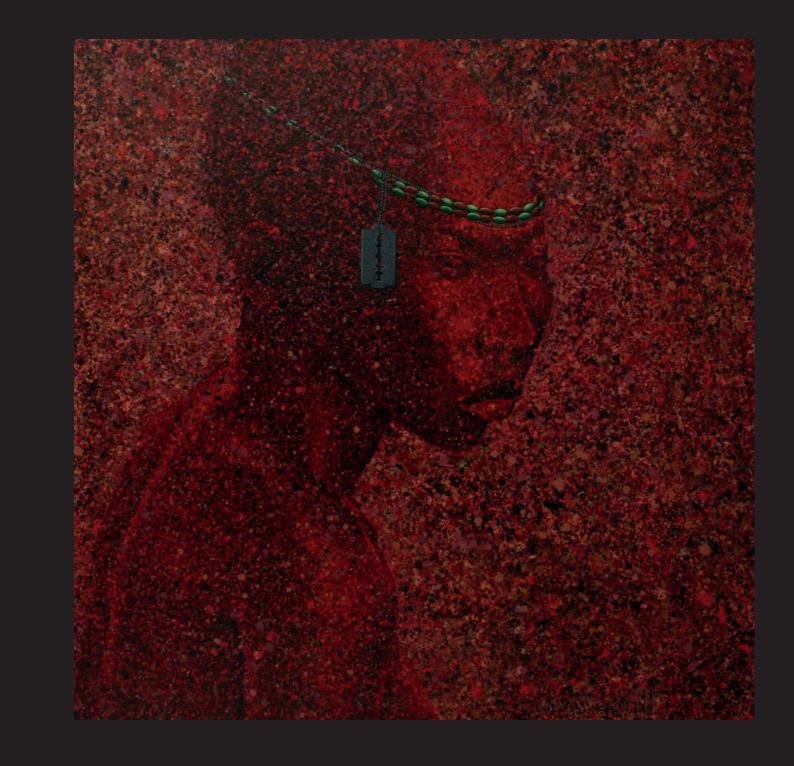
Welcome to Mother Tongue!

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 Ebighgbo (MFA, M.Phil, Phd), Ann Arbor, MI: MPublishing, University of Michigan Library, 2009

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 dialog – a dialog that is not limited to Nigerian or even African culture, but which includes and embraces a European and indeed even 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 turn of the millennium also brought with it a turn 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 it 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 the 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-orphan, who later transferred to the class of A.R. Penck, whereby the two artists never really spoke the same language. With Buthe, it was very different – extremely intense and "from the heart", so to speak. The fact that Buthe's studio in Cologne was located in a former electric-transformer station says a great deal about the energy that he 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 large 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 descendent, an heir, someone who carries on the tradition – but in his own unique and inimitable way. He combines the abstract, tone-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 thus 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 glances over her shoulder, peering sternly if not angrily, accusingly, into 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 corporeal punishment in Nigerian schools, we see his anger and rage at time-honored customs that have no place in contemporary society. Around the top of her shaved head, the young woman wears a chain of colored 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 dog tag worn by members of 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 manifested in Kwubiri's sculptural works and installations, which take the form of stereotypical African tribal art but are constructed from modern European utensils for painting and eating (two forms of nourishment: 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 uncontrolled 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 tabletop 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 activist 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 painters of Art Informel in France and Germany of the post-war years – artists who were to become the professors of younger painters such A.R. Penck and Gerhard Richter. The drips and sprinkles of paint can be read as a kind of homage to Michael Buthe, 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 cults in which art is not illustration but rather an expression of mystic secrets, 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, enigamtic figures with a life of their own. It is from these memories that he is 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 imbues the medium with an energetic 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 this. As a traveler between worlds, Chidi Kwubiri is the perfect tou

Gérard A. Goodrow Director ART COLOGNE 2003 - 2008

writings on the wall



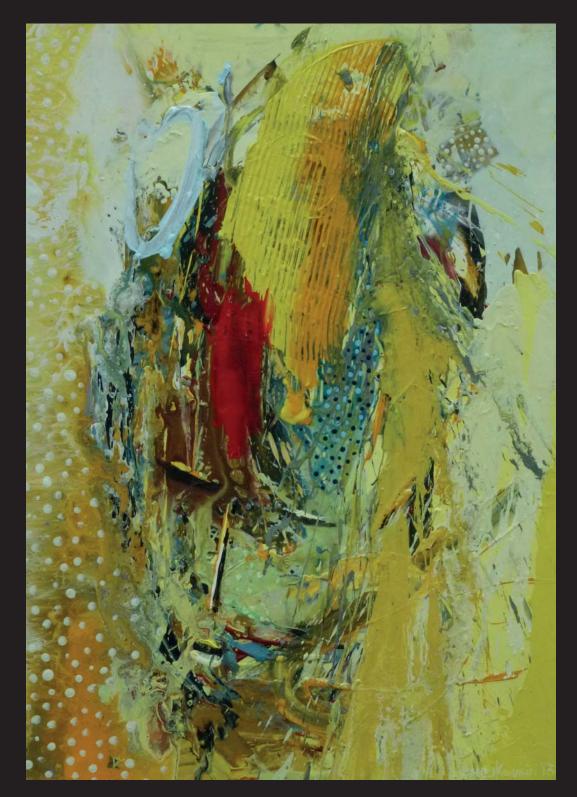
writings on the wall I - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm



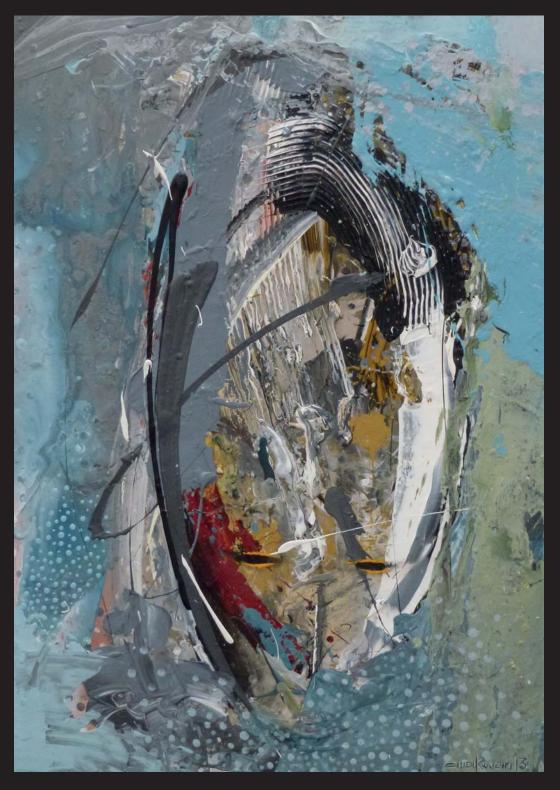
writings on the wall VIII - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm



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



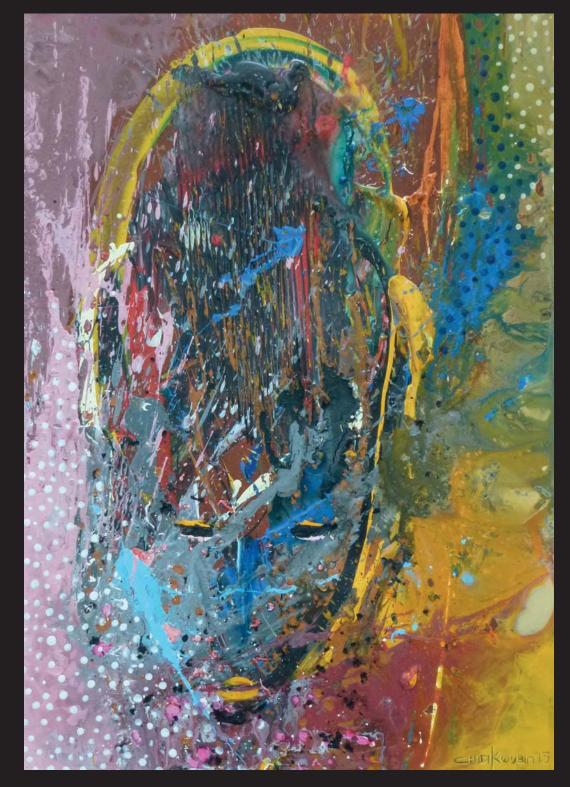
writings on the wall VII - 2013 - acrylic on paper - 100 x 70 cm



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



'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.

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

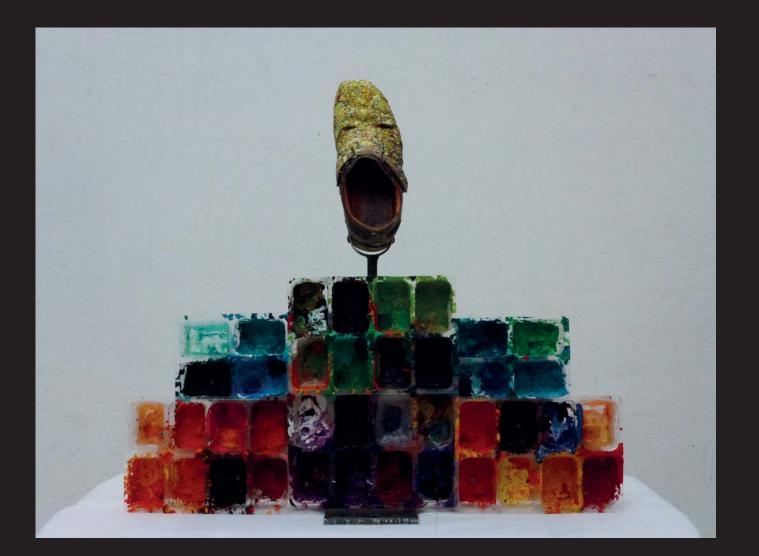
gresses. Here – and very much in the style of recycling art popular among contemporary African artists – Kwubiri uses simply everything: work shoes, cutlery, even the yogurt cups in which the paints for the other two art styles are mixed. His installation, 'emptiness in the midst of abundance' (2011), 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 colonialisation, in his works Kwubiri addresses the new problems of globalisation and worldwide economic interdependencies.

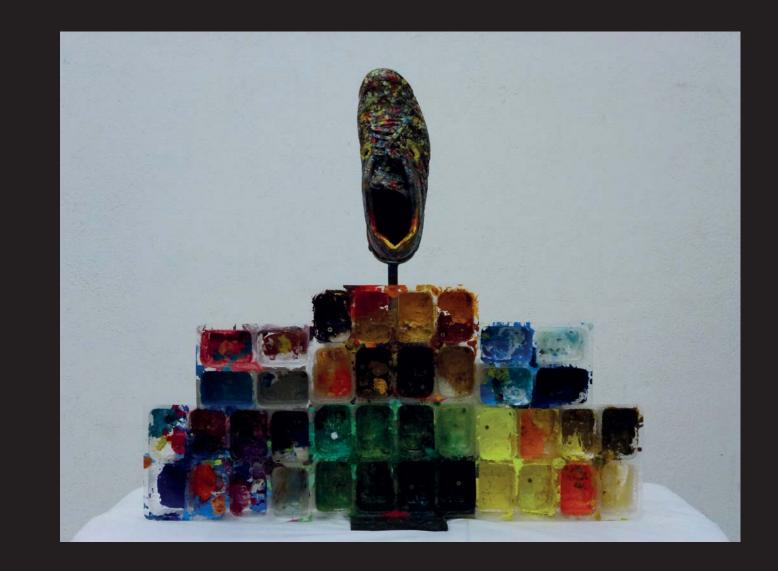
Interdependencies. Kwubiri is an artist of the postcolonial, an artist of ruptures, contrasts and contradictions: timeless at first glance, his paintings speak to very contemporary themes; his seemingly abstract paintings are actually figured; his motifs are inspired by African-nostalgic flair; his technique, on the other hand, bears the marks of Western influences; he regularly returns to the vibrating city of Lagos to, in his words, 'download', 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

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



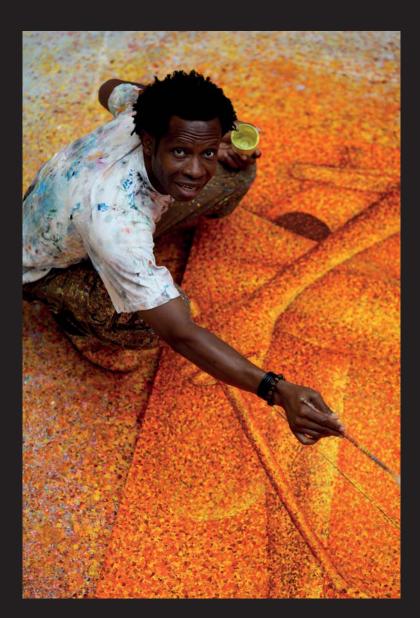
in the groove - 2013 - acrylic on canvas - 200 x 300 cm

Piece on the art

My first experience of Africa was being deposited in British Airways left luggage in Murtala Mohamed Airport, Lagos, an unclaimed and unaccompanied minor. Sitting amongst the luggage and chaos, Lagos assailed 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 its artistic origin.

of work all together in this the country of its artistic origin.

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



CHIPI 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

- "reflection", Signature Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria (s) Millenia Fine Art, Orlando, Florida/USA

- CHURCH STREET GALLERY, Orlando, Florida, USA (s) Landtag Nordrhein-Westfalen, Duesseldorf, Germany
- 2000 UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France
- 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

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

- 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 - international art fair "LINEART" (Gallery DE OPSTEKER), Ghent, Belgium
 - "Artists from Germany", CHURCH STREET GALLERY, Orlando, Florida, USA

1999 - Koelner Bank (two artists), Cologne, Germany (s) - Dr. Georg Haar Foundation, European Art Capital 1999 WEIMAR, Germany

- 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

special thanks

- 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...



Sponsors

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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 Orolami. Sam Ourstit Oyelami, Sam Ovraiti, 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 peo-

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.



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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!







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unique and the exceptional. "only one quality, the finest".

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

for a particular art form, enthusiasm for innovation and a quest for the beautiful: these are the se-crets of the House Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin.

Veuve Clicquot instills "Art de Vivre" (art of living) to any occasion, and a preferred taste for the

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vation is the mainstay of its strategic approach, creativity one of its founding values. Finding a cer-tain 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.

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 equiped 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