



**OSELOKA OSAD=BE**













OSELOKA  
OSADEBE  
INNER LIGHT







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**Deutsche Bank**

THE  
WHEATBAKER  
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**LOUIS GUNTRUM**







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Untitled, Painting, oil pastel on white paper, 1964, 70x 49.5cm

# FOREWORD

Herbert Wigwe

One of the core values of Access Bank is to support innovation and power all aspects of human creative endeavour. We believe that in order to develop our rich continent, Africans must harness the power of our creativity, using leading technology to push the boundaries of sustainable development. It is for this reason that we support cutting-edge artists and creative projects to project a positive narrative to the global community.

We are delighted to sponsor *Inner Light*, an important historic exhibition showcasing the work of Oseloka Osadebe, a dynamic member of the famous “Zaria Rebels” student group. As we celebrate this great artist, we hope our youth will be inspired by the innovative thinking of a few bold arts students in the late 1950s and early 1960s whose work became a game changer for the entire Nigerian contemporary art scene.

Our five-year strategic plan aims to enhance the perception of Africa by drawing the attention of the global community to our rich history, cultures, and arts, and it will create enabling platforms and funding for the sustainable development of small- and medium-scale artistic enterprises, ensuring that we participate fully in the global art market.

Herbert Wigwe  
CEO, Access Bank





Igbo Dancers, pencil on paper, 1965, 35.5 x 27cm

# PREFACE

HRH Nnaemeka Alfred Ugochukwu Achebe CFR  
Obi of Onitsha, Agbogidi

*Peace and reconciliation  
based on truth and  
transparency  
as a foundation for  
sustainable development*

I am delighted that an exhibition project I envisioned over twenty years ago has at last come to fruition. Professor Oseloka Osadebe—uncle to my dear wife, Igwenwanyi Ngozi—is one of the most important artists to come out of Onitsha, and I am relieved that his legacy is at last being recorded for posterity. His contribution to the growth of contemporary art in Nigeria as an active member of the Society of Art in Zaria is an important story that must be told.

Osadebe was born in 1932 in Onitsha, Eastern Nigeria, to a unique family of three sets of twins, of which he and his sister were the oldest twins. His father was a pastor who considered his son's artistic talent a distraction. It was not until Osadebe completed secondary school and gained admission into the prestigious College of Art, Science and Technology in Zaria that his father accepted his son's amazing talent.

Osadebe joined a group of dynamic students who were seeking to express a fresh perspective on classical art—a perspective which embraced their rich African traditions. His best friends since childhood were Demas Nwoko, an Igbo prince, and Uche Okeke, who had already distinguished himself as a student thought leader in trying to break away from Eurocentric art traditions to create a new visual language rooted in African symbolism, history, traditions, and beliefs. Together with other young, forward-thinking art students, they formed the Zaria Arts Society, which became known by the popular name, the “Zaria Rebels”, and whose members would become the fathers of the contemporary art movement in Nigeria.

From 1964 when Osadebe left Nigeria to pursue graduate studies in the United States to today, fifty-four years later, his life and work have remained a mystery. Over the years, we have encouraged him to come back home and share his amazing artistry. Of particular interest is how he combined his expertise in visual art with his skills from many years working in theatre.

We are delighted that, at last, *Inner Light* will reveal and celebrate our uncle's creative genius. I trust the exhibition will be an inspiration to other older artists who should come forward and share their life stories. I trust it will also inspire more scholarly work to be done in documenting our contemporary art history.

Lastly, I pray that the government realises how important it is for our children to know their history. History must be reinstated in our school curriculum.

I thank everyone who made this exhibition possible, and I congratulate our dear uncle, Professor Oseloka Osadebe, on his first retrospective art exhibition after a long and fruitful career!

HRH Nnaemeka Alfred Ugochukwu Achebe CFR  
Obi of Onitsha, Agbogidi



Full figure (Akimbo), Oil colour pastel on white paper, 1995, 60 x 45cm



# ENCOUNTERS WITH A GENIUS

Sandra Mbanefo Obiako

Oseloka Osadebe is a talented enigma. For over fifty years, he has kept the powerful strokes of his pencils, pens, and paintbrushes from the public eye. An active member of the famous “Zaria Rebels” student art group at the College of Art, Science and Technology, Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University) in the early 1960s, he left Nigeria in 1965 to pursue graduate studies in the United States. Except for a few brief family visits over the years, Osadebe lost contact with the vibrant, postcolonial art community of his heady student days and embarked on a life in academia, teaching theatre at different universities across the United States.

Two years ago, I was contacted by HRH Igwe Alfred Nnaemeka Achebe, the Obi of Onitsha (Agbogidi), who asked me to consider doing a retrospective exhibition of Osadebe’s work. Agbogidi’s wife is Osadebe’s niece, and over the years, they had tried to encourage their talented uncle to return to Nigeria and do an exhibition, all to no avail. But recently, the tide turned, and the octogenarian realised he needed to return to his roots and share his wealth of experience and artistry.

Having never heard of the artist, I began my research with the support of Osadebe’s closest relative, his nephew Sam Maduegbuna, the son of Osadebe’s older sister.

In-between long phone calls, I visited Osadebe for the first time in his home studio in Jackson, Mississippi in May 2017, and met an agile man, full of life and creative energy, brimming with excitement at the prospect of doing an exhibition in the homeland he had left behind so many years ago. I was amazed at the diversity of artwork spread across his large work table which took up the entire living room of his ground floor flat. His apartment has been a home studio since his retirement from teaching at Jackson State University in 2007. The paintings, sketches, and drawings that were pasted on the walls of his home were impressive. While I quickly looked through the stacks of artwork and photographed paintings and the numerous sketch pads full of amazing drawings and old photographs, Osadebe was more excited to show me a new work he was creating called *Fly Woman Fly*, an installation and performance piece which would require audience participation and which is centred on feminism.

As artist and nephew went in and out of the living room, bringing more and more works to show me, I peeped into the inner rooms, filled from floor to ceiling with stacks of books and papers from a lifetime of professorial work. I was both excited and overwhelmed, trying to come to terms with the mammoth task of putting together a cohesive storyline out of the profusion of materials presented.

During my second visit to him in August of this year, Osadebe showed me intricate new works he was creating. He unrolled large paper sketches on which he was re-exploring the concept of reincarnation, a thematic thread that runs through most of his work. He called the series *The Eternal Comings and Goings*, and showed us numerous large drawings depicting clusters of human forms in ascent, intertwined with flocks of birds.

We spent the afternoon filming a long interview in which he spoke about his early years and colourful experiences. We finished the interview in the car, driven around the neighbourhood by an agile, confident professor who spoke about his passion for cooking, his opinion of millennials, life in the southern United States, and politics. He expressed immense gratitude that he was still active and able to look after himself.

The work in this exhibition are simply a snapshot of Osadebe's life and vast oeuvre and do not adequately reflect the entire breadth of his vision and work which is still in full swing. But they provide a wonderful re-introduction to an artist whose important contribution to contemporary art in Nigeria had almost been forgotten.

The journey of preparing an exhibition of this magnitude can be as lonely and nerve-wracking

as the process of creating the art. My team and I have tried to painstakingly compile, catalogue, photograph, and restore the works in this exhibition, asking the artist to fill in the gaps and provide contextual information surrounding his work. Maduegbuna's frequent phone calls and visits to his uncle in Mississippi, from his home in New York, cannot be underestimated; his invaluable moral support to his uncle during the highs and lows of this journey, as well as his help with the research and bringing over artworks from the United States, were integral to the success of this project.

While we have carefully pieced together the different elements of Osadebe's extraordinary creative journey spanning over half a century, there is always, unfortunately, that element of human error in any endeavour. As can be imagined, it is sometimes difficult to remember the exact timing of certain events in one's youth, and during the final preparation of the works for shipment to Nigeria, the artist incorrectly dated a few drawings and, in one case signed the artwork twice. Although this may pose a problem for art historians, it shows how difficult it is to piece together the work of a lifetime. That notwithstanding, the eighty-five works in this exhibition, which range from 1960 to 2014, give a fantastic arc of the artist's work, showing how he matured and deepened his creative interpretation over the years.

During the past twenty-four months of working on this project, my respect for Osadebe's mastery has grown. The strength and intricacy of his art is a testament to the strength of his imagination. Osadebe is a solitary genius, consumed by his thought world. He has lived alone for many years, with few distractions from his mental journeying, and this comes across very powerfully in his art.

## THE PATH TO *INNER LIGHT*

Osadebe finally returns to his homeland, Nigeria, to present *Inner Light*, his very first retrospective exhibition, which I believe reveals his essence in eighty-five paintings, sketches, and drawings—with one sculpture. The exhibition traces his artistic journey—from growing up in the bustling city of Onitsha, Eastern Nigeria, in the 1930s and 1940s, to studying in Zaria, Northern Nigeria from 1958 to 1962, to eventually leaving Nigeria for a lifetime of work in the United States. I have tried to crack the shell surrounding Osadebe's artistic inspiration, to burrow through layers of memory, experience, and philosophy in order to understand the core of his artistic luminosity. *Inner Light* is the first attempt at capturing Osadebe's rich and vast artistic oeuvre, and, I believe, just scratches the surface of his philosophical creativity.

In this exhibition, we follow his creative path through distinct historic periods and thematic series. The first set of works are from his early student days at the College of Art, Science and Technology in Zaria, followed by a short stint teaching at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, and then his years studying painting and sculpture at the Art Institute in Chicago where he graduated with his master's in fine arts in 1967.

We start with one small sculpture, *Father & Son*, an example of some of the large bronze works Osadebe created in Chicago during this period. His sculptures, like his line drawings, clearly reflect an Uli aesthetic with its linear strength and powerful voids and spaces.

Osadebe interprets his physical surroundings in its diverse forms through his sketches and a few canvas works from this early artistic period. We see a series of classic mother-and-child line

drawings as well as sketches of the Nsukka and Zaria landscapes. Alongside drawings of traditional Igbo dance and headdress is his master's thesis work on *Iba*, the innermost sanctuary in traditional Igbo architecture, which is the nucleus of the family's lineage and spiritual tap root.

In the next exhibition segment, we see Osadebe's stylistic experiments, starting with caricatures he created depicting his family. He calls these hybrid figures with pig snouts "piggly-wiggles", seemingly influenced by Picasso's line drawings and reminiscent of some of Uche Okeke's drawings. Five small experimental paintings of a coffee pot reveal Osadebe's experimentation with Cubism.

This is followed by a section on human forms tracing Osadebe's artistic maturity from realistic figuration in the early 1960s to studio sketches from his drawing classes with Mr Keane, one of the teachers at the Chicago Art Institute, to his foray into abstraction.

From 1968 to 1973, Osadebe completed a second master's degree in theatre at the Goodman School of Drama, Chicago, followed by his focus on West African theatre at Northwestern University where he obtained a doctorate in 1981.

Osadebe became one of the very few African masters who combined their passion for visual art and theatre while drawing on the rich traditions of African and Western drama. This segment of the exhibition showcases works inspired by his years studying and teaching theatre, throwing light on Osadebe's expertise in set design. Numerous sketches reflect spiritual and psychological drama alongside physical stage movement in both Shakespearean theatre like *Hamlet* and



contemporary classics, as well as in his interpretation of African folktales and stories. His interpretation of the African American experience is reflected in the numerous posters he created during his years teaching theatre at Spelman College, the historic black university for women in Atlanta.

The fourth and final part of the exhibition throws light on Osadebe's major thematic works, including *Inner Light*, *Tree of Life*, *Fallen from Grace*, and *Ikemefuna*, which all explore his mystic beliefs in greater detail. His style varies greatly, ranging from exquisite, almost classical Renaissance sketches to masterful drawings with minimalist fluid lines and forms. These series touch the very core of Osadebe's beliefs in the spiritual struggle between good and evil, which marks the very essence of humanity's quest for a higher calling. This dichotomy of spiritual ascendancy vis-à-vis the primordial pull towards darkness is a strong thread running through all of Osadebe's work. His preoccupation with the struggle of the inner man is perfectly presented in the intricate pencil and Conté works on paper and board called *Inner Light*. Two multifaceted beings fight for supremacy in three different renditions of this theme dating from 1965 to 2013. The artist grapples with the soul's struggle to overcome earthly temptations in its yearning to ascend to a higher realm of spirituality. In each of these drawings, rendered in blue and grey and, in later years, in red and black, Osadebe paints a flurry of energy surrounding a human form whose face becomes clearer with each iteration.

The latest *Inner Light*, produced in 2013, shows a tenuous face peeping out from behind a mask which appears to be peeled back to reveal the eyes of the soul while the form's raised red arm

appears to be gaining the upper hand. Two sets of feet at the bottom of the drawing clearly show the equal footing of two forces entangled in a dance for supremacy, each aware of the other's deft ability to move into a position of superior power.

The exhibition ends with *Ikemefuna*, the blind minstrel, inspired by the lives of two famous African American singers, Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder. This beautiful pencil drawing shows a bare-chested man dressed in a wrapper and playing a thumb piano while a woman watches in admiration. This is Osadebe's ode to the importance of overcoming one's challenges in life and embracing one's purpose despite the struggle to conquer physical and emotional shortcomings. An inspirational ending to the exhibition and an encouragement to keep up the good fight and never give up.

## LEGACY

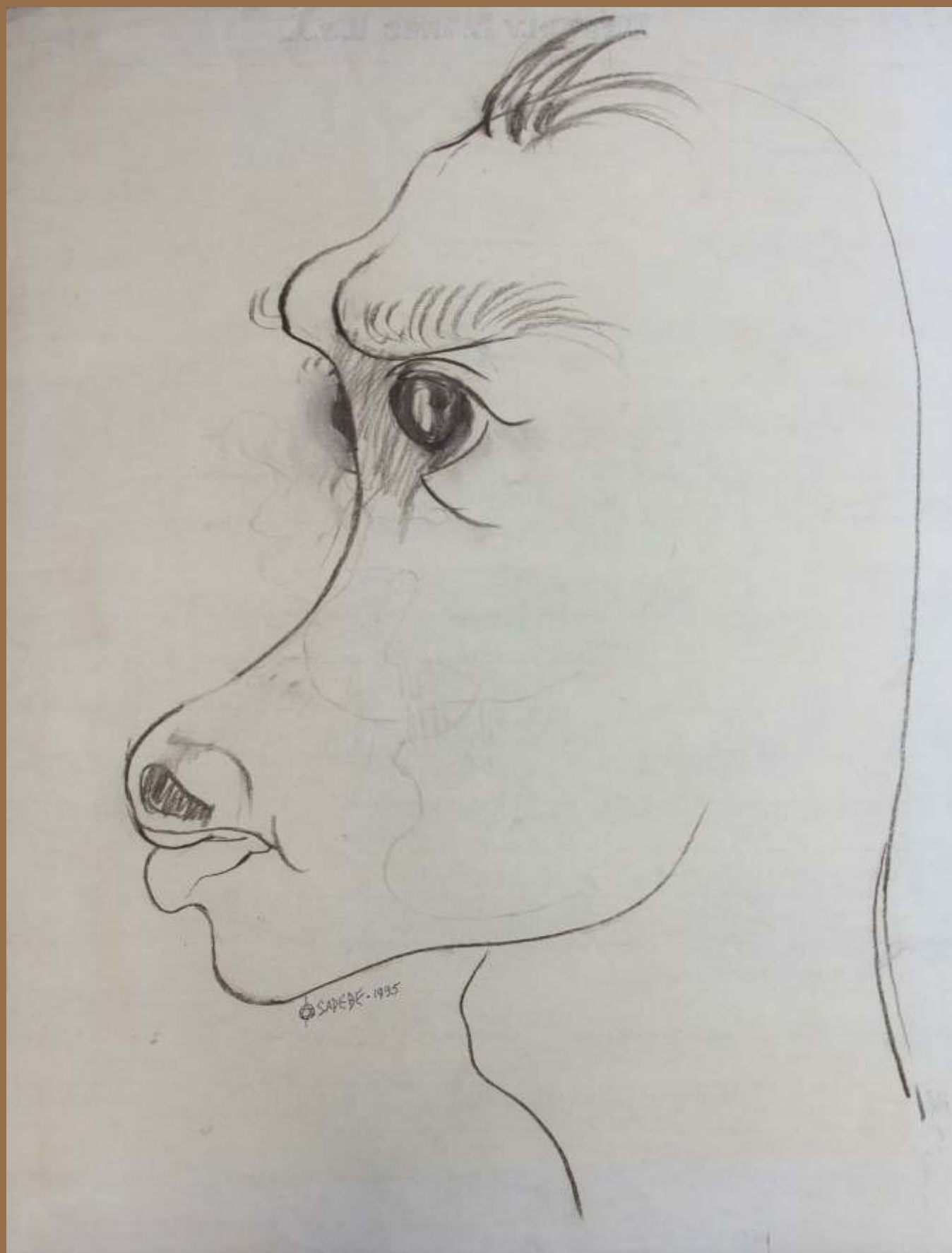
It is Osadebe's hope that this exhibition inspires other artists, both young and old, to continue creating their art. It is my hope that this exhibition inspires more work to document artists who are advanced in years and whose legacies must not be lost.

This is my second retrospective exhibition presenting important works which span over half a century. My first was in 2016 when I curated an exhibition of works by Bruce Onobrakpeya, a contemporary of Osadebe's. We presented over 300 works spanning Onobrakpeya's career, including works from some of Nigeria's greatest artists who had been mentored at Onobrakpeya's Harmattan Workshops during an eighteen-year period.

This year, Simi Adesanya curated a bold exhibition of Nigerian masters which included many works from the pioneers of the Art Society. I have heard that there are other exhibition plans to showcase the works of the “Zaria Rebels”. The more we document our history the better.

My prayer is that *Inner Light* celebrates the legacy of Oseloka Osadebe and provides a unique bridge reuniting him with Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, Yusuf Grillo, and his other artist schoolmates. We will all be able to enjoy the powerful inner light these amazing artists emit, and celebrate their important contribution to Nigerian art and humanity as they continue to inspire us.

Sandra Mbanefo Obiango  
Curator



He-Man, Pencil on Paper, 1995, 64 x 48 cm



# OSELOKA OSADEBE ICONOCLAST, TRAIL BLAZER

Sam “Odi” Maduegbuna

My first consciousness of him was vague: a long gone uncle, brother to my mother. Out overseas while war raged at home. Gone before the war yet in everyone’s heart and mind. The one that escaped, the one that followed his heart, followed his passion. Gone. Yet always on everyone’s mind. Always spoken of but never seen, thought of but never felt. Except, of course, in images seen years later. Images as photos of what he looks like—what it meant to live in America, to be in America. Photos sent many years after he was long gone, it seemed. Yet, in retrospect, he was no more than a few years gone. It was my first time seeing anyone’s photo with notes inscribed behind it by him. Expressive inscriptions, notes of affection to a younger sibling. Emotions lyrically expressed, masterfully penned like works of art in an impeccable fashion by a natural-born master artist. Notes as musings. Musings I saw and remembered—one most clearly, even to this day:

*Take the African out from the jungle,  
But you can’t take the jungle away from him.*

Why communicate in that manner, my young self asked the recipient, his younger brother Chuma? That was in the mid-1970s, “when I was in Enugu”, as the Nigerian musician Joe Nez once sang. You see, Uncle Chuma explained:

*It is the art in him,  
It is the expressionist in him,  
It is the constant need to express.*

Expressions in words, visual images, images of him gardening. The photo with notes behind it was of him in his home garden, out somewhere in Chicago, tending to plants and flowers, neatly and artfully arranged, like no other I have ever seen. Plants as high art, I thought. But why?

Sending a photo of himself gardening to his brother Chuma was indeed an artistic connection. For this was a brother whose own garden, then on Port Harcourt Street, Uwani, Enugu, rivalled any other—save the plots of gardens I was to see many years later at the Bronx Botanical Gardens here in New York. Sending such a photo to his younger brother, himself an artist and a draughtsman like Uncle Oseka, was most fitting. Fitting and revealing of his avant-garde nature, which I did not then know about.

I did not know that he was a member of the famed Zaria Art Rebels, or that he taught art at Nsukka, where I came to study exactly two decades after he left, and made Christmas greeting cards for the Great Zik. How could I have known? He was already gone! I was a few years old then. Yet the photo with notes left an indelible impression. Who was this man? Who was this great uncle living so far away whose presence was loud and felt?

He was felt in words spoken in anticipation of his return. The war was over—"Aya ebego," we said in Igbo. Uncle Oseka had education—multiple degrees—yet he was not here. But there was a reason for his absence. He was teaching. He had transferred and moved his painting and sculpting into theatre in all its forms—design, production, directing, teaching, playwriting, executing, and even acting. It was, certainly, the art in him that kept him away.

But his presence was always in and with me. For art was all around me. His art was natural: a gift from God not only to him but to all his siblings and their offspring—some of them architects, musicians, and dramatists today. His eldest sister, Mercy, was the true pioneer, a leading light in fashion design and culinary art. His twin sister Chineze was a master gourmet and pastry chef and designer. His immediate older sister, my mother Dora, was also a master chef, pastry artist, and designer, and, I dare say, an architect of all cooking and baking implements. His other sisters, all older, are gifted as well. Multilingual, most, if not all, of them—fluent in Yoruba, Ibibio, Efik, Igbo and several arcane Igbo dialects. Languages picked up due to their father's many sojourns as an Anglican schoolmaster and, later, clergyman, moving from station to station throughout Igboland and the upland Igbo towns west of the lordly River Niger.

The supremacy of his craft was not clear to me for years. But they were made clear as I got older, as I drew closer. I then realised how prominent he was. How majestic he stood when one speaks of contemporary Nigerian art. The murals in Enugu, at the famed Presidential Hotel and at the Mbari Centre—they are proof of his position and preeminence. But it all came perfectly together

much later in the early 90s as I got closer, and reached out, and met the man, lived briefly with him, spoke more with him, and realised we shared the same middle name, Okwudili. The power of his art was then most realised. His creativity in every aspect of art, his ability to sculpt, draw, write, teach, act, direct, produce, create, project, was overpowering, he would always tell me. That was at Pegg Road, East Point Georgia, that then sleepy southern suburb of Atlanta. Even then, it was still a mystery how he was able to do all that, but little did I know at the time how prodigious his talent was. It took some more years in the 2000s for that to be realised, now in Jackson, Mississippi, after retirement from Jackson State University and Tougaloo College. By then one had long been dabbling in art. Collecting. Why collect? I knew not why. But it manifested out of the blue sometime in the early '90s, perhaps driven by some urge, to the point that a major international auctioneer was quick to remark, "I was most impressed with the scale of your collection. You really do have the bug!"

Now, over twenty years later, I know why: the collecting was the expression of the art in the Osadebes. My strong maternal gene pool on overdrive. Hours spent sitting in front of works by Olisa Nwadiogbu, Gabby Emengo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Ifeanyi Mbanefo, Kainebe Osahenye, Tola Wewe, Demola Adepoju, Rom Isichei, and many others—staring, gazing, studying, trying to make out the essence of each while out in the wintry climes of Mohegan Lake, miles north of New York City. Drawn to works of African art, mostly by Onitsha indigenes, Enwonwu included. I now know. It was the art in the Osadebes. It was the gift most bestowed on, most expressed, through Uncle Oseka.

Much later did it all come together for me. I had read and seen his works researched and discussed in scholarly writings and books on Nigerian art and the Zaria Rebels. Writings by Okeke-Agulu, Onyema Offoedu-Okeke, and others. But the first real awakening was my first physical interaction with his art—first in the image of, in my humble view, his classic, *Ikemefuna*, followed by his latest masterpiece, *Inner Light*. There and then did it really dawn on me that there lies with him a treasure trove, a body of elegant works of great art and such range, totally unexposed, that could easily be lost for eternity: the *Piggly Wiggles*; the *He-Man*; the lyrical Uli experiments in competition with his bosom friend, Uche Okeke, back in the early '60s when they were at Zaria and later at Nsukka; the many stills and nudes done in Chicago and other parts of the U.S.

The thought of these masterpieces being shared with the world was a pull, a need to exhibit, to show and tell, to save these works for posterity.

This urge led to many months of work leading to this first full retrospective exhibition in honour of this trailblazer, iconoclast, master, and pioneer, Oseloka Okwudii Osadebe. (Notice all his names are in seven numerals. Mystical, he'd say!)

We, the descendants of his father, Reverend Daniel Odiatu Osadebe, are most grateful for his life and mastery, and hope that through this exhibition, a new generation of artists and Nigerians will be exposed to the unique and surreal style of this giant of art in all its forms. For this return, a true rebirth, even after more than two scores and ten among the diaspora, congratulations and bravo to Uncle Oseka and the Power of Art are definitely in order.

Sam "Odi" Maduegbuna  
Mohegan Lake, New York  
9 September, 2018





Untitled, oil pastel on linen paper, 1973, 75.5 x 66cm



# OSADEBE'S LONG JOURNEY

Chika Okeke-Agulu, MFA, PhD

The occasion of Oseloka Osadebe's first one-person exhibition in Nigeria, in more than fifty years, is a remarkable event that will no doubt fill in one more of the many gaps in modern Nigerian art scholarship. A member of the now legendary Zaria Art Society, the group of art students at the Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology (NCAST), Zaria (1958-61)—the founding of which became “the inaugural act of mainstreaming modernist art in Nigeria during the 1960s”—Osadebe featured prominently in the lively Ibadan and Enugu art scenes of that decade (Fig. 1). However, his relocation to the United States in 1965, at about the same time as his other Art Society colleague Okechukwu Odita, resulted in his resounding absence from Nigerian art circles and scholarship since. Granted that in the process of establishing a distinctive career as a theatre designer and director from the early 1970s, his output as a painter was inevitably diminished. But, as this exhibition reveals, he kept faith with his artistic journey through these years. My task in this brief essay is thus two-fold. First, I return to the 1960s to examine his early work and its place in the context of the Art Society's promulgation of what I have described as postcolonial modernism. In doing this, I note points of convergence and rupture between his vision of



Fig 1: Prof Osadebe & fellow pioneer students of the Zaria Arts Society.

the modernist work and that of his peers within and outside their circle. Second, I look at the long arc of his artistic practice to make sense of the radically different pictorial modes that inform his early and late work. For it seems to me that while the former was the outcome of his desire to assert his conviction about the value of pictorial resources developed by European avant-garde and Igbo traditional artists in the making of postcolonial artistic subjectivity, the latter shows an artist who, late in his career, returns to realism as an expedient tool for exploring, or rather as the effective language for articulating experience and manifestation of the mystical and the metaphysical.

## Toward The Modern

In the early 1950s, as a student at Merchants of Light Secondary School, Oba—a small town not far from his hometown, Onitsha—Osadebe made the acquaintance of another student, Demas Nwoko (b. 1935), who would later introduce him to the other inaugural members of the Art Society at Zaria. As was usual in those days, on completing his secondary education, Osadebe worked in the public sector as a draughtsman with the Lagos-based *The Post and Telegraph* newspaper while he planned for further studies overseas. In 1958, however, he gained entrance into the NCAST diploma programme in fine arts and soon was introduced by Nwoko to Uche Okeke (1933-2016) and Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932), the other two core members of the Art Society, just as they were establishing the group. While Osadebe was not as well-known within and beyond Zaria as the group's leaders, he was nevertheless fully committed to its main objective, namely, the development of a modernist aesthetic out of a generative combination of formal and conceptual elements from indigenous Nigerian artistic traditions and those associated with the European modernist avant-garde.

<sup>1</sup>See, Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).



Fig. 2: Oseloka Osadebe, *Lunch at the Park*, 1961. Asele Institute, Nimo, Collection. Photo: Chika Okeke-Agulu



Fig. 3: Oseloka Osadebe, *Husband and Wife*, 1964. Asele Institute, Nimo, Collection. Photo: Chika Okeke-Agulu

As we now know, a key part of the Art Society's activities was research into and presentations on specific art forms, festivals, and religious and ritual practices of various Nigerian cultures. For them, this was an act of re-education, a reconnection to the traditional arts of Nigeria, which was not on offer in the art school's Western-oriented curriculum. This sharing of their research findings—from the fieldwork they carried out during the holidays—afforded them a wider spectrum of cultural and artistic resources than they had through their tuition. It was, in other words, their first significant attempt to lay the grounds for experimentation with specific indigenous art forms. What is clear, however—and in part because of the preponderant focus on Western art and artists in their formal training—is that Osadebe and his Art Society colleagues mostly emulated the work of the historical avant-garde and the British figurative modernism championed by Sir William Coldstream and his followers at the Slade. So, for instance, his *Lunch at the Park* (1961), painted in his final year at Zaria, depicts two African women preparing or sharing food in a style reminiscent of the work of their teacher, Clifford Frith (Fig. 2). Osadebe's style at this point was similar in many ways to that of Okechukwu Odita (b. 1936), his classmate and fellow member of the Art Society who, when he presented his work at his one-person exhibition in Lagos in 1962, was accused by a critic of staying uncomfortably close to Frith's figurative and painterly style.

But if *Lunch at the Park* reflected a strand of Osadebe's early work, influenced by what one might call the conservative modernism of postwar British painting, his *Husband and Wife* (1964), painted while a lecturer at the Department of Fine and Applied Art, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, shows him at his best in following the more primitive style of the German Expressionists who (with the

Fauves in Paris) equally had considerable influence on the Art Society group (Fig. 3). It is as if the tightly constructed composition, the controlled drawing, and the simplified illusionism of *Lunch at the Park* had given way to a riot of savagely angular planes, and fervid, deskilled brushwork. These two paintings show the extent to which Osadebe—perhaps more faithfully than his Art Society peers—learnt through practice the vigorous formal strategies of the European avant-garde even as he looked to explore elements of Igbo Uli painting and cultural themes.

Although the record is not entirely clear, it is quite likely that Uche Okeke's pioneering study of Igbo Uli drawing and painting, first through his own mother, and secondly based on his own research and experimentation, inspired Osadebe's turn to Uli after Zaria<sup>2</sup>. And while Okeke had his breakthrough in 1962 with his *Oja Suite* in which he attained a consistent and articulate lyrical formalism that was entirely expressed in the character of his line and in his orchestration of a dynamic relationship of negative and positive space, Osadebe's Uli-inspired work lacked the same mastery of aesthetic and design principles associated with the tradition. Nevertheless, there is no question that he saw in Uli, as did Okeke, as an important source of pictorial elements with which he *embellished* his compositions—as he did in many Nsukka-period work, including his 1963 mural, *Ibo Life (Festival)*, at the Mbari Centre, Enugu.

Whereas after 1962 Okeke's drawing and painting depended on the Uli aesthetic for their pictorial and formal affect, Odita's mural—with multiple figures set against wide space-bound walls *decorated* with Uli motifs—illustrated the use among the Igbo of this art form on walls and fabrics. By 1967, as I show shortly, his Master of Fine Art thesis studio project, *Iba*, shows Osadebe quite

<sup>2</sup>Osadebe has recently spoken—in his interview with Sandra Mbanefo Obiagio—of developing his Uli-inspired work in competition with, rather than after, Okeke. However, archival research shows that Okeke was the first to embark on serious research into and experimentation with traditional Uli form and aesthetic as the basis for a modernist artistic language. See my *Postcolonial Modernism* book, especially chapters three and five for an account of the Art Society artists and their work during the 1960s. For Osadebe's discussion of his relationship with Okeke's work, see Sandra Mbanefo Obiagio, interview with Oseloka Osadebe, Jackson, MS, August 13, 2018.





Fig 4: *Coffee Pot Braque 1908*, watercolour on paper, 1965, 28 x 22cm



Fig 5: *Fallen From Grace*, watercolour on paper, 1972 - 1976, 93.5 x 93.5cm

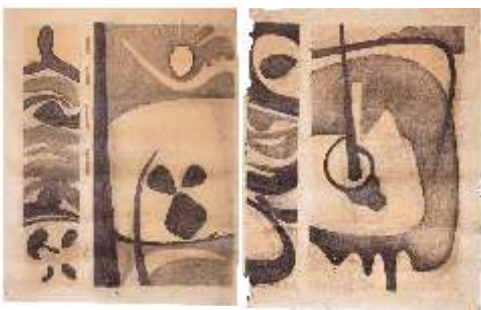


Fig 6: *Iba* Diptych, Charcoal on Paper, 1967, 123 x 96.5cm each

close to achieving the total reconfiguration of his pictorial language through the Uli design and form.

Despite that he relocated to Nsukka soon after graduation from Zaria, Osadebe was an inaugural and active member of the Mbari Centre, Enugu, which in those days was the locus of artistic, intellectual, and cultural production and discourse in Eastern Nigeria. Established in 1963—and modelled after the Mbari Artists and Writers Club Ibadan that was cofounded by Ulli Beier, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Christopher Okigbo, with Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Es'kia Mphahlele, Vincent Kofi, and others among the founding members—Mbari Enugu convened Eastern Nigerian artists, writers, musicians, playwrights, and critics, many of whom would later participate in the cultural workshops established in the breakaway Republic of Biafra (1967-70). Besides his mural at the Centre, Osadebe had one-person exhibitions of his work there in 1963 and 1964; his third exhibition, in late 1964 at Mbari Ibadan, would be his last in Nigeria, until this present show. What this history demonstrates is the fact that besides his membership in the Art Society, he was well-connected to the circuit of postcolonial modernists between Enugu and Ibadan.

In 1965, Osadebe received the Aggrey Fellowship and left for the United States for graduate studies at the Art Institute of Chicago, obtaining an MFA in painting and sculpture in 1967. That experience, no doubt intense, seemed to have simultaneously shored up his earlier tentative exploration of the pictorial strategies and legacies of the European avant-garde as well as his studies of Igbo Uli aesthetics and design. A series of paintings and watercolours executed perhaps in 1965 in the manner of such leading modernists as Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso (in their Analytical Cubist stage) (Fig. 4) and the Futurist Giacomo Balla—as well as another

series a few years later which he called *Fallen From Grace*—testify to his commitment to the pictorial tactics of the historical avant-garde (Fig. 5). On the other hand, his studies at Chicago provided him an opportunity to explore with greater sophistication and vigour, and thus come quite close to developing a distinct pictorial language based on Igbo Uli. Whereas he previously *illustrated* Uli motifs in his murals, prints, and paintings, by the end of his studies at the Art Institute—as his studio thesis project and other ancillary works show—he had begun to compose with abstract shapes and linear elements, and with negative space in such a way that evoked the lyrical pictorial sensibility of traditional Uli design—the very thing Uche Okeke had achieved a year before with his *Oja* and *Munich* suites (1962-63). A diptych charcoal drawing, *Iba* (1967), exemplifies this new pictorial sensibility (Fig. 6)

Although Osadebe practised as a studio artist for a few years after completing his studies at the Art Institute, he increasingly turned to drama, returning for further studies in this field during the 1970s. After earning a doctoral degree at Northwestern University with a dissertation on “The Evolution of the Igbo Masker as a Dramatic Character” in 1981, he taught at various colleges—including Spelman College and Tougaloo College—where he wrote, directed, and designed sets for numerous plays. He has painted and sculpted sporadically since. In any case, a few paintings he produced, most likely while an assistant professor at Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago (1969-72), show the promise of his focused inquiry into the Uli aesthetic while at the Art Institute. Two versions of a painting, titled *Folklore-Bird and the Man*, feature vertically-oriented curvilinear lines, combined with bold arcs and pseudo-spirals, against a background of soft-edge areas of red, gold, and green (Fig. 7). As with the diptych *Iba* of 1967, the composition of the two works is



Fig 7: *Folklore - Bird and The man*, acrylic on paper, 1973, 128 x 81cm



Fig 8: *Inner Light*, conte crayon on board, 2013, 123 x 80.5cm

semantically abstract. But whereas the earlier work, in the way solid shapes and lines are organised, insinuate architectonic space, the *Folklore* paintings stretch our imaginative power to implicate anthropomorphic and avian forms expressed in the title.

#### On Metaphysical Realism

It comes as a surprise, therefore, despite his full immersion in the modalities of abstraction following his studies in post-Cubist modernism, as well as in the protocols of Uli art and design until the 1970s, that Osadebe would shift, in his late work, to pictorial realism with greater vigour than at any time in his career. How might one account for this? Did he at some point in his life and career recognise the limitations of the pictorial languages of the two modernist traditions—one from the historical avant-garde, the other postcolonial—that had informed his previous work? What is clear is that in returning to the studio following his retirement from teaching, he frequently went back to themes and compositions he had developed earlier in his career, recasting them in more decidedly naturalistic modes of expression. In the *Inner Light* series, the first of which he probably made in the mid-1960s while at the Art Institute, we can track this journey from abstraction to what one might call metaphysical naturalism. Whereas the first work demonstrates his confidence in deploying splintered planes and dynamic arcs developed from his studies of Cubist and Futurist forms, the second, coming two decades later, clearly indicates the emergence out of the tumultuous and inchoate mass parts of the human body: a gesturing hand at the upper left, a mask-like formation in the centre, digitated shapes suggestive of more hands and a crotch in the mid-section, and two unformed feet at the bottom centre. There is no doubt that this second image restages the formal elements of Analytical Cubism, but it also leaves obvious hints of Uli design elements.

But the tentative manifestation of the figure in the second drawing becomes decidedly concrete and real in the third (Fig. 8), heightening the tension, or, better still, the struggle—if one thought of the scene in evolutionary terms—between unformed primaevial forces and forms of life as we know it. The fragmented forms have now organised themselves into two emergent figures, one evanescent and red, the other black and more defined. But there are several intriguing elements in this image. A realistically rendered face pokes out of the now-shattered mask in the second drawing. The navel of the black figure is replaced by the Eye of Horus (embodied in the goddess Wadjet), and on the ankle of the red figure is the Trident, associated with Neptune, the Roman god of the seas, and Shiva, a major deity in Hinduism. Might this entanglement of the Egyptian goddess of protection and good health with a being that, depending on our perspective, is either Neptune, with his symbol of creation/destruction, or Shiva, with his evil-fighting sign, be Osadebe's way of imagining life and the cosmos as constituted from the interaction between oppositional forces and orders of existence? Despite the capacious references to world religions and mythologies in the *Inner Light* series, for Osadebe, the drawings speak to the concept of reincarnation and the journeys of the soul through different earthly and metaphysical realms as it reaches higher states of purity and consciousness, until it attains perfection<sup>3</sup>.

But if the *Inner Light* drawings show a struggle between fragmentation and reconstitution in the human body, and between abstraction and realism, in two of Osadebe's most recent works, he appears to be so totally committed to the modalities of pictorial realism even as he explores metaphysical themes. In *Tree of Life* (2013) and *Ikemefuna* (2014), both of which are new versions of subjects he also first explored in the 1960s, there is no trace of the modernist forms still present in the *Inner Light* drawings. Rather the artist deploys a style

<sup>3</sup>Sandra Mbanefo Obiagio, interview with Oseloka Osadebe, Jackson, MS, August 13, 2018.





Fig 9: *Ikemefuna*, charcoal and conte crayon, 2014, 102 x 68cm

that, on the one hand, exhibits the descriptive power of naturalistically rendered imagery, and, on the other, sidesteps the compositional rigour of perspectival ordering. Thus, in *Ikemefuna*, which shows a powerfully built, bare-chested, blind minstrel with his *baka* (thumb piano) performing in front of a seated woman on the right and a hooded man standing on the left, the spatial relationship of foreground and background is unclear, resulting in a compositionally flat image, which in turn heightens the mystery of the scene (Fig. 9). The sitting woman, with her head propped by her right hand, seems to admire the vigorous performance, while the hooded man—perhaps a monk—with his hand tucked into his habit, appears indifferent, his gaze turned upward and away. The minstrel's large Ankh pendant, the ancient Egyptian symbol of life, deepens the mystery of the scene and the subject of this drawing. However, by juxtaposing the ecstatic minstrel, the monk figure, and what could be an admiring mother or spouse in the airless space, Osadebe has composed an existential drama in which vocation, artistry, love, and life triumph over disability.

This use of pictorial realism by Osadebe as a tool for exploring metaphysical subject matter, a style Abayomi Barber (b. 1928) and his Lagos-based school of painting introduced in the Nigerian art scene in the 1960s and 1970s, reaches a new height in *Tree of Life*. In this theatrical scene framed by a monumental baobab tree, a genuflecting woman reaches out with both hands to grasp a blinding light source handed to her by a floating baby, himself held aloft by a faceless winged cherub<sup>4</sup>. Two giraffes and two antelopes watch from the flanks, as does an owl peeking out from a hole high up in the baobab trunk (Fig. 10). The awkward perspectival lines and foreshortening of forms, the collapsing of pictorial space, combine with the enigma of the action and actors to deliver what can only be an account of a metaphysical event. The artist has spoken of the origin of this image,

which he locates in his family lore—a story about mystical beings that followed his siblings in early childhood<sup>5</sup>. But he also conflates it with an apocryphal event in the life of the biblical Mary and Jesus. But these stories are not enough to make sense of the scene, which in terms of the action of the three figures, spectators, and the flora and landscape is suggestive of an incident only possible in the supernatural realm. Perhaps only an African metaphysics, because it allows the possibility of seamless interaction between the inhabitants of the phenomenal world and the denizens of the spirit world, can point us to the many possible truths of this enigmatic scene.

Osadebe's artistic journey, as the foregoing suggests, has indeed been a long one. From the young artist who, with his Art Society peers at the dawn of political independence in 1958 announced their commitment to a formal language informed by indigenous traditions, to an early career in the United States, during which he explored modes of abstraction first developed by the historical avant-garde, and finally to the mature artist who found renewed interest in realism, his evolution is quite remarkable. Arguably, the stylistic shifts have depended on what drawing and painting did for him at various moments in his career. In other words, the desire to demonstrate his understanding of the task of painting and art in the decade of Independence through the mastery of the artistic language of postcolonial modernism accounts for his evolving style during the 1960s and 1970s. But in his years overseas, a time during which his interest in the mystical and the spiritual grew, he seemed to have decided to return to realism as a vehicle for articulating complex ideas and subjects too laden with meaning to be compellingly expressed through his earlier abstract and modernist modes.

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Fig 10: *Tree of Life*, pencil on paper, 2013, 66 x 40.5cm

<sup>4</sup>The cherub's face is sketchily rendered, perhaps an indication that the work is still unfinished.

<sup>5</sup>Sandra Mbanefo Obiogo, interview with Oseloka Osadebe, Jackson, MS, August 13, 2018.



Milk Maid, oil on canvas, 1965, 123.5 x 59.5cm

# THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR IN THE ART OF OSELOKA OSADEBE

Oliver Enwonwu

Early in his career, Oseloka Osadebe developed an interest in Uli, the ancient form of Igbo body and wall painting. However, with increasing maturation as an artist, his work flows primarily out of his internalisation of ideas about reincarnation. A frequent and recurring motif in Osadebe's imagery is the representation of life. Life is represented explicitly by a tree and a mystical journey—a metaphor for the process by which knowledge is gained.

Indeed, gaining knowledge provides the opportunity for a metaphysical transformation. These spiritual or transforming journeys are central to Oseloka Osadebe's art, as well as to his autobiographical experiences. According to the artist, this path of enlightenment or reincarnation involves the continuous crossing of boundaries or realms, from the physical to the spiritual, and imbues one with purifying and regenerative capacities until a state of perfection is achieved.

This phenomenon is exemplified in the artist's *Inner Light* series, from which the exhibition draws its title. It documents the artist's quest for perfection and empirical truth. Overlooked in narratives of modern art in Nigeria, this important solo exhibition by Oseloka Osadebe, after a hiatus from the local scene since 1965, is aimed succinctly towards a more inclusive history of modern art in Nigeria. Therefore, it provokes discourse centred on his almost sixty-year career—much of it spent in the United States studying and teaching theatre and drama.

Beginning with a brief examination of his early engagement with Uli aesthetics and design, *Inner Light* investigates the impact of European Modernism, theatre, and drama on his current trajectory—the overarching focus of this essay. The historical period covered by the exhibition, from 1960 to 2014, features eighty-five works

comprising paintings, drawings, and a single sculpture. It is most significant at this time for its two main thrusts. First, to bring more awareness of his work to the audience in Nigeria where he, together with others like Uche Okeke (1933–2016) and Bruce Onobrakpeya (b.1932), was a founding member of the Zaria Art Society in October 1958<sup>1</sup>. Second, to call for more dedicated research on his life and artistic output. Importantly, the Zaria Art Society is recognised as the first indigenous art movement in sub-Saharan Africa—built upon the philosophical foundations laid by Ben Enwonwu (1917–1994) in defining a new Nigerian visual language by fusing indigenous traditions with European materials, techniques, and conventions of representation<sup>2</sup>.

To access the deeper symbolic associations contained in Osadebe's art, it is valuable to learn something of the influences he has embraced. He was born and raised in Onitsha, a commercial, pluralistic society which embraces Christianity and indigenous traditional religions. Many accounts of history concur that the Onitsha people migrated from the Edo Kingdom of Benin during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and settled east of the River Niger among the Igbo. Proud of their Edo-Benin heritage, they evolved some of the most complex knowledge systems and elaborate cultural displays to emphasise their uniqueness<sup>3</sup>.

In the mid-1850s, Onitsha assumed new status as an important trading port, giving rise to an influx of British palm oil traders, Christian missionaries, and immigrants from the Igbo hinterland. By 1935, when Oseloka Osadebe was born, the culturally rich town had been imbued with a cosmopolitan complexion, which served as the background for his art.

Osadebe is convinced that he was born an artist: "When I came out of my mother's womb, I came out with chisels, hammers, and saws, and with these tools I began to create art. I believe my



artistry is something God had already schooled me in; it then became a matter of how to apply these tools <sup>4</sup>". These words offer us insight into Osadebe's spiritual leanings and describe the ambience of Onitsha society, where the artist spent his formative years. He recalls spending his childhood crafting models of aeroplanes and cars to reflect the ongoing technological advancements. And while at primary school, he fashioned baskets from raffia. Oseloka Osadebe would go on to attend Merchants of Light Secondary School in nearby Oba, where he became classmates with artists Demas Nwoko (b.1935) and Okechukwu Odita (b.1936), later fellow members of the Zaria Art Society.

Osadebe's father, an Anglican clergyman, encouraged him to spend much time reading the Bible. Eventually convinced that his son was divinely led, he caved in to his plea to study art. In 1958, Osadebe gained admission to the College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria. Personal experiences, including surviving two major train accidents on his way to Zaria, further entrenched his belief in the supernatural <sup>5</sup>.

At Zaria, Oseloka Osadebe's friendship with Demas Nwoko and, later, Uche Okeke blossomed. Okeke has been described as the ideologue of the Zaria Art Society <sup>6</sup>. Both men were ahead of Osadebe by a year, on account of the time he lost to the train incidents. Okeke exerted a strong influence on Osadebe who drew inspiration for several significant drawings from two book compilations on African folklore based on the stories the former's mother regaled them with for hours <sup>7</sup>.

In 1962, he graduated with a bachelor's degree in fine arts. His thesis emphasised the ritual context of Igbo art production and the indigenous artist's mastery over temporal and spiritual forms. Among his accomplishments are the mural at the Mbari Artists and Writers Club in Enugu.

Completed in 1963, it shows his early engagement with Igbo aesthetic traditions. That year, he gained employment as an assistant lecturer in the Art Department of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Solo exhibitions then followed at the Mbari Centre in Enugu in 1963 and 1964, the same year he held his last exhibition in Nigeria at the Mbari Centre in Ibadan.

Soon, Oseloka Osadebe won an Aggrey Fellowship and proceeded to the United States in 1965, where, in fulfilment of a Master of Fine Arts degree in painting and sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago, he presented the design of an *iba* for his thesis. More importantly, his research provided him a deeper understanding of the *iba* as a ritual location where the *okpala* (titular head of a household and lineage elder) performs rituals to sustain the connection between that lineage and their ancestors <sup>8</sup>. This marked another defining moment in the young artist's life, and from then on, he increasingly channelled his creative energy to access the metaphysical and mystical realms. Arguably, Oseloka Osadebe's study of painting and sculpture in Chicago better exposed him to the underlying philosophy and formalistic approaches of early 20<sup>th</sup> century art in Europe. In the next few years, he busied himself developing his own visual vocabulary. A second master's degree in scene design, lighting, and directing followed in 1973 at the same institution, and in 1981, a PhD in Western and African theatre and design from Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. His dissertation, "The Evolution of the Igbo Masker as a Dramatic Character", provided him the opportunity to explore, in the context of performance, masking as a process of transformation—an embodiment of a spirit being in physical form.

Oseloka Osadebe returned intermittently to his art while building a successful teaching career in theatre and drama at several prestigious



institutions across the United States, such as Spelman College, Atlanta and Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago. There, he wrote and directed many plays, as well as designed several stage sets, gaining a nomination for a Howard Foundation Fellowship in 2002. Since retirement, he has remained in the United States where he continues to practice and exhibit his art.

Oseloka Osadebe's experiments in fusing African and European aesthetics are multifaceted, and draw from his several identities in response to different socio-cultural circumstances and the supernatural. He is a painter and sculptor, as well as a theatre and set designer. Therefore, his diverse output cannot be understood as a linear progression of styles and is, at best, cyclical. As evidenced by his broad oeuvre, he oscillates seamlessly from a personal interpretation of Uli aesthetics to a more psychologically expressive hybrid with European Modernism, adhering to the tenets of academic realism as encountered in his nude sketches and later drawings investigating the metaphysical.

An early charcoal diptych, *Iba* (fig. 53), presented in the exhibition, reveals Osadebe's initial engagement with Uli as a useful tool in conveying his feelings about object surfaces rather than describing their outward appearances. Four early pen and ink drawings in the Uli manner feature, too: *Mother & Child* (1965; fig. 8), *Mother & Child* (1965; fig. 9), *Nne Delu Nwa Uli* (1964; fig. 10), and *Nne Na Nwa Uli* (1964; fig. 11). Executed entirely in continuous, curvilinear lines, the drawings describe physical presence and psychological character, creating illusions of open space.

Closely related in style, and betraying Oseloka Osadebe's growing awareness of European artistic movements, are the *Piggly Wiggly* and

*Inner Light* series. Reminiscent of the work of Paul Klee (1879–1940), Osadebe gives his imagination free rein in the *Piggly Wiggly* series (see figs. 6A–E, 7A–B, and 7D). Completed between 1960 and 1968, the clever title is very much part of the visual message. Ambling around like a doodle, the continuous curving lines create a playful rhythm and form transparent shapes that overlap with one another.

In the 1964 pair of sketches, *Ibo Dances* (fig. 13) and *Sketch Sadonic [Sardonic]* (fig. 15A), Osadebe also explores whimsical lines with the title of the latter apt and added as a satirical note. His excitement with gestural lines is also notable in his interpretation of the gyrations of the dancers in the pencil drawing, *Igbo Dances* (1965; fig. 13), and in *Tree of Life* (1964; fig. 38), one of two silkscreen paintings in the exhibition.

Circa 1965, Oseloka Osadebe turned to Cubism and Futurism in seeking new ways to capture a sense of the mystical, drawing parallels with his personal experiments with Uli and his study of theatre. Four 1965 watercolour paintings after Georges Braque (1882–1963) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)—*Coffee Pot Braque*, *Braque*, *Collage Braque*, and *Synthethic [Synthetic] Picasso* (see figs. 49, 50, 51, and 52)—embody Osadebe's increasing embrace of the formal elements of Cubism. In comparison, the paintings in the manner of Braque exude charm and contrast strongly with the forceful, even brutal, quality in those after Picasso. In *Balla Futurism* (1965; fig. 52A), Osadebe's aesthetic and ideological debts to Giacomo Balla (1871 – 1958) are obvious. Here, he energises the somewhat static geometry of his Cubist paintings and broadens his palette. Adopting Futurist sheaves of lines and faceted planes, he is successful in expressing the ceaseless activity of modern machinery and the frenzy of contemporary life, as recalled from his childhood in Onitsha.

Two drawings of full male figures in oil pastel and black and red crayon, *Untitled* (1964) and *Untitled* (1967) (see figs. 70 and 71), share similar formal qualities with three colour drawings in Contè (figs. 32, 33, and 34) from the *Inner Light* series. The earliest of these is dated 1965 while the others were completed in 1965 and 1981. Together, they betray the artist's sustained engagement with Cubism during this period to define his pictorial mode, and are united by a restrained manipulation of tasteful colour, fractal surfaces, and value patterns. Staying close to nature, the figures are treated as decorative shape patterns but are recognisable without aiming to merely imitate appearance.

Produced later in silkscreen, *Untitled Uli-Legere Style* (pencil and charcoal, 1969; fig. 18) serves to illuminate the artist's stylistic direction. In this drawing, we observe a continued inclination to imbibe from the European avant-garde Modernists—in this example, Fernand Léger (1881–1955), a French painter, sculptor, and filmmaker who like Osadebe created a personal form of Cubism but gradually modified it to a more figurative, populist style.

The *Fallen from Grace* series recalls the biblical fall of man in the Garden of Eden and is represented here by two works completed in 1972: a watercolour on canvas and a pen-and-ink drawing on paper (figs. 27 and 40). The series shows the artist's dexterity with line. Pulsating with significant emotion, he is successful in transcribing his nervous energy to convey meaning.

Two acrylic paintings, both titled *Folklore – Bird and the Man*, executed in 1968 and 1973 respectively (figs. 24 and 25), particularly stand out in the ensemble. Strongly reminiscent of *Iba*, an early charcoal drawing (fig. 53), these paintings rely heavily on Uli forms and the abstract—the freely moving biomorphic shapes

in rich combinations of hues attempting to interpret the realms of people, animals, and nature on physical and metaphysical planes.

*Untitled, Doodling of Sun Rays* (1973; fig. 66), an oil pastel, perhaps represents another defining point in the artist's career, as he turns his attention again to the mystical and metaphysical. Here, the rays are represented as concentric circles constantly morphing into patterns. One continuous whole, the knots and swirls imbue the lines with extra force as they surge towards the borders of the plane. Massed together and varied in spacing from narrow to wide, they produce an illusion of varying energy levels. The three paintings in oil pastel on linen paper—*Untitled, Multicolour Abstraction – Female Form*, 1973; *Untitled, Multicolour Abstraction – Female Form*, 1975; and *Untitled, Multicolour Abstraction – Nude Female*, 1975 (see figs. 60, 61, and 62)—owe a small debt to Expressionism for the use of wild colour. They perhaps serve as an intermediary phase of development between his earlier Futurist drawings and the more recent Realist experiments, with natural appearances overpowering expressions of pure artistic form. Differing radically from Osadebe's Uli experiments and engagement with modern European art movements are his nude drawings and figurative studies. They show an active and increasing engagement with Realism between 1974 and 1995 and may be viewed as anatomical studies for the artist's more elaborate compositions involving more figures, like the *Tree of Life* series that records the manifestation of the metaphysical.

Five posters executed between 1986 and 1990 are examples of Osadebe's work to promote plays during his academic career in the United States (figs. 46B, 80A, 81A, 83A, and 85). To ensure that reference to content is apparent, the artist may have been compelled to present his forms in a Realist manner. Indeed, from the

period, Oseloka Osadebe worked in a postmodern idiom, returning to sample the historical—majorly Realism—a tool that proves useful to his current focus on representing the complexity of the mystical and metaphysical realms.

Interestingly, Oseloka Osadebe again emphasises his cyclical penchant for revising old forms and themes as he returns to his Uli experiments first begun three decades ago in *Untitled Caricature*, an oil pastel dated 1995 (fig. 68). It is of a seated form, and is laced with as much satire as *He-Man*, a pencil drawing of the same year (fig. 63) in which the figure's lower jaw, nose, and mouth are extended and achieve prominence. Both share a whimsical nature with his 1964 sketches, *Ibo Dances* and *Sardonic [Sardonic]*.

Since his early experiments with Uli and Modernist European stylistic canons, Osadebe has devoted much of his art to a representation of reality as seen through the Igbo belief system. In recent work bordering on the spiritual, including *Tree of Life* (2013; fig. 37), the artist interrogates the impermanence of life and belief in an afterlife. He also explores the behaviour on earth that facilitates a “fullness of life” as

exemplified in *Ikemefuna* (2014; fig. 30), with the music icons Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder who both overcame setbacks and physical impairments to achieve success<sup>9</sup>.

Oseloka Osadebe incorporates symbols frequently into his imagery, prompting the viewer to consider these issues. They often include intensely explored ritual objects and altarpiece forms to evoke religious practices in the physical and metaphysical planes. An extant example is found in the Ankh pendant, symbolic of life in ancient Egypt, resting around the neck of the main figure, a blind minstrel, in *Ikemefuna*. However, Osadebe advances beyond a mere symbolic interpretation. His success lies in signifying the hidden dimensions behind the façade of everyday existence. By inviting us to contemplate our dual existence both within and outside ourselves, Osadebe contributes to the perfection of the individual. We are thus compelled to set aside our secular way of thinking and meditate in seeking answers to questions regarding our own existence, death, and eventual transition.

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#### NOTES

1. “Extracts from Uche Okeke’s diary 1957-1961”, Paul Chike Dike and Pat Oyelola, *The Zaria Art Society: A New Consciousness*, Lagos, 1998, pp 270-289.
2. Paul Chike Dike and Pat Oyelola, *The Zaria Art Society: A New Consciousness*, Lagos, 1998, p 17.
3. Ogbechie, S. 2008. *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist*. University of Rochester Press: New York; and Boydell & Brewer: Suffolk, p 26.
4. Interview with the artist by Mbanefo-Obiagio, Sandra in 2017 and 2018.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Take Your Road and Travel Along: The Advent of the Modern Black Painter*. (13 March – 16 March 2008), p 29.
7. Interview with the artist by Mbanefo-Obiagio, Sandra in 2017 and 2018.
8. Ogbechie, S. 2008. *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist*. University of Rochester Press: New York; and Boydell & Brewer: Suffolk, p 198.
9. Interview with the artist by Mbanefo-Obiagio, Sandra in 2017 and 2018.





# THE ZARIA SCHOOL

Onyeama Offoedu-Okeke

The ancient city of Zaria resounds with the glory of its feudal past, evident in the remains of mud architecture, the gilded *arewa* motifs and scripts on the Emir's palace walls, and the thundering hooves of colorfully attired horses during the annual Durbar ceremonies. Zaria is home to one of Nigeria's first universities, the Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology, later renamed Ahmadu Bello University of Zaria after the first premier of the northern region. Established in 1952 by the British colonial government, the university initially modeled its curriculum, including the art courses, after the British school system. This curriculum gave rise to a memorable artistic revolution, drawing attention to the legacies of Africa's cultural heritage and its vital role in shaping a post-colonial future for its people. Dissatisfied with the direction of the art curriculum and its formalistic orientation, a number of students questioned the validity of the institution's educational policies. Among them were Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo, Demas Nwoko, Simon Okeke, Ikponmwose Omagie, William Olaosebikan, Oseloka Osadebe, Okechukwu Odita, Felix Ekeada, and Ogbonnaya Nwagbara. Buoyed by nationalistic fervor, they came together to form a group called the Zaria Art Society and defined an agenda to rediscover the traditional arts of Nigeria and to incorporate them into their curriculum. Uche Okeke, the principal spokesperson for the organization, defined the ideology that emerged from this effort as Natural Synthesis and it established a conceptual framework for integrating cultural values in the conceptualization of art. It should be noted, however, that the idea of Natural Synthesis was inspired by the innovations of Ben Enwonwu, whose work stressed the fusion of Igbo and European cultures through which he produced unique forms of modern African Art.

The ideological project of the Zaria Art Society transformed art education at NCAST as its European staff yielded control of the art program to Nigerian instructors with the advent of Nigerian independence. The resulting cohesion of ideological and aesthetic focus ultimately created a viable movement in modern Nigerian art identified as the Zaria School. Key figures of this movement such as Gani Odutokun (born Abdul Raji, 1946-1995) expanded the focus of natural synthesis to include the ancient heritage of Islamic arts in northern Nigeria with his lyrical style and dynamic fusion of Islamic calligraphy and European modernist aesthetics. The Zaria art program is often regarded as the mother institution of Nigerian art schools because after the first members of the Zaria Art Society graduated, their careers took them to numerous universities throughout Nigeria where they all created important art education programs that influenced several generations of post-colonial Nigerian artists.

Onyeama Offoedu-Okeke, *Artists of Nigeria*; pg. 72-73













# The Artist



# BIOGRAPHY

## Professor Oseloka Osadebe

Professor Oseloka Osadebe, born in 1934, is an outstanding artist, playwright, theatre director, and teacher. He grew up in Onitsha, Anambra State, and, from an early age, distinguished himself as a brilliant draughtsman, eventually earning acceptance into the prestigious Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria. He became a pioneer member of the famous Zaria Art Society and graduated in 1962 with specialisation in painting and sculpture. He proceeded to teach art at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka from 1962 to 1965, before leaving the country on an Aggrey Fellowship for African Students to pursue graduate studies in the United States.

He graduated with a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1967, and he received a second master's degree in 1973 from the Goodman School of Drama, Chicago, specialising in scene design, lighting, and directing. He completed his doctoral work at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois in 1981, specialising in Western and African theatre and drama, and spent years teaching theatre and set design at numerous universities, including Jackson State University, Northeastern Illinois University, Tougaloo College, Spelman College, and Central State University. He is a member of the Association of Theatre in Higher Education and the Mississippi Alliance for Arts Education.

Osadebe retired in 2007 and has spent the last eleven years reviving his passion for visual art at his studio in Jackson, Mississippi. He returns to Nigeria for the first time in over fifty years to present a retrospective exhibition of rare works he created from 1960 to 2014.

OSELOKA OSADEBE

THE ARC OF MORAL UNIVERSE  
IS LONG, BUT IT BENDS TOWARDS  
JUSTICE MARTIN LUTHER KING



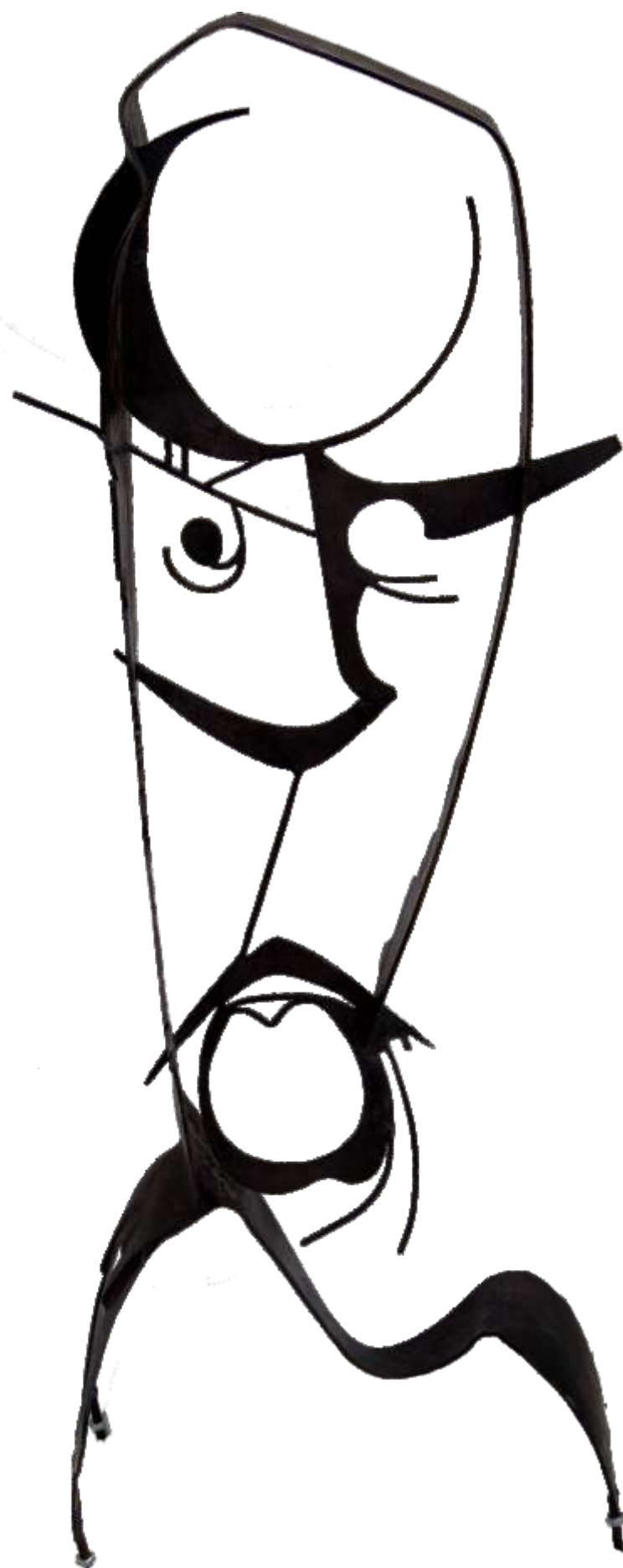




# Sculpture







Father and Son, Bronze, 94 x 31cm





Osadebe working on sculptures during his studies at the Chicago Art Institute, 1965-1967



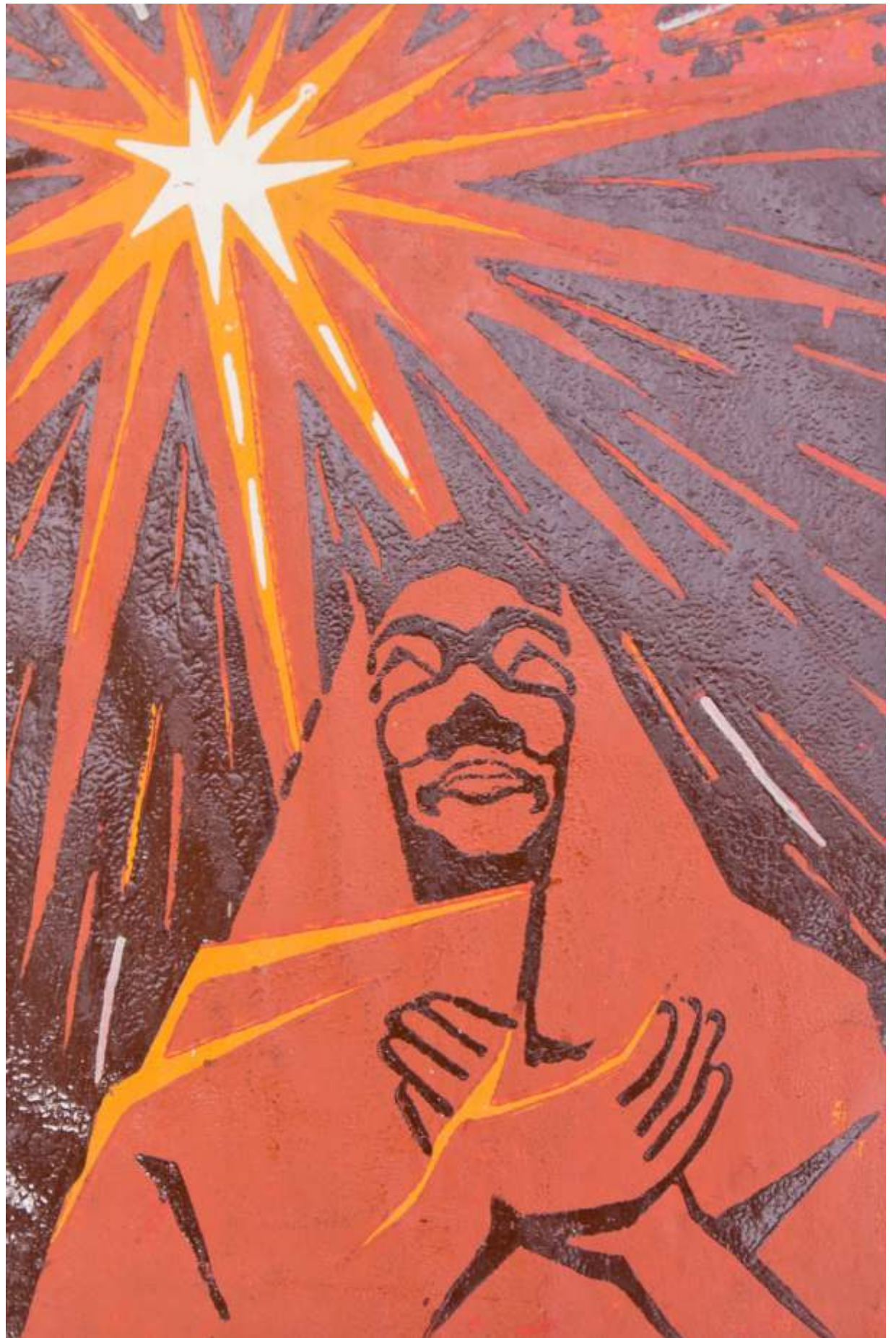
First life size father & son sculpture produced in the mid 1960's





# Observing Life





He liveth, Silk screen, 1960, 36 x 25.7cm



Mother & Child, Silk Screen, 1961, 28 x 19.3cm

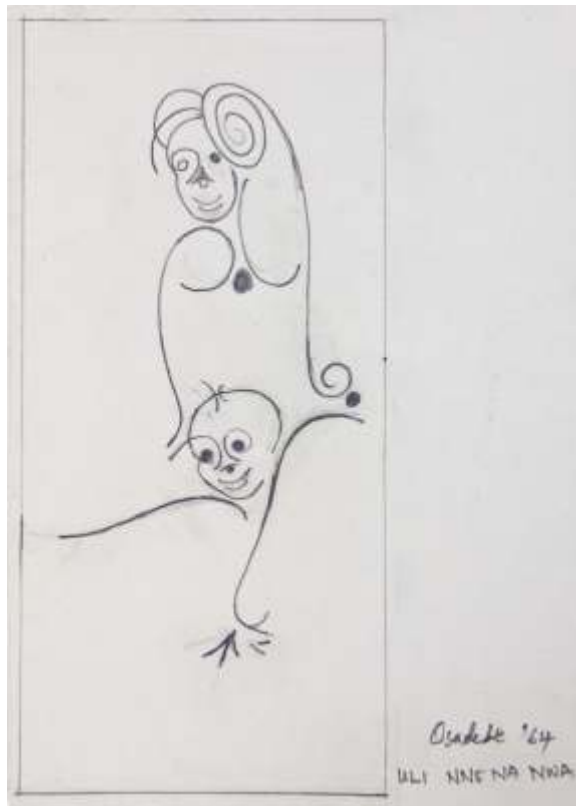
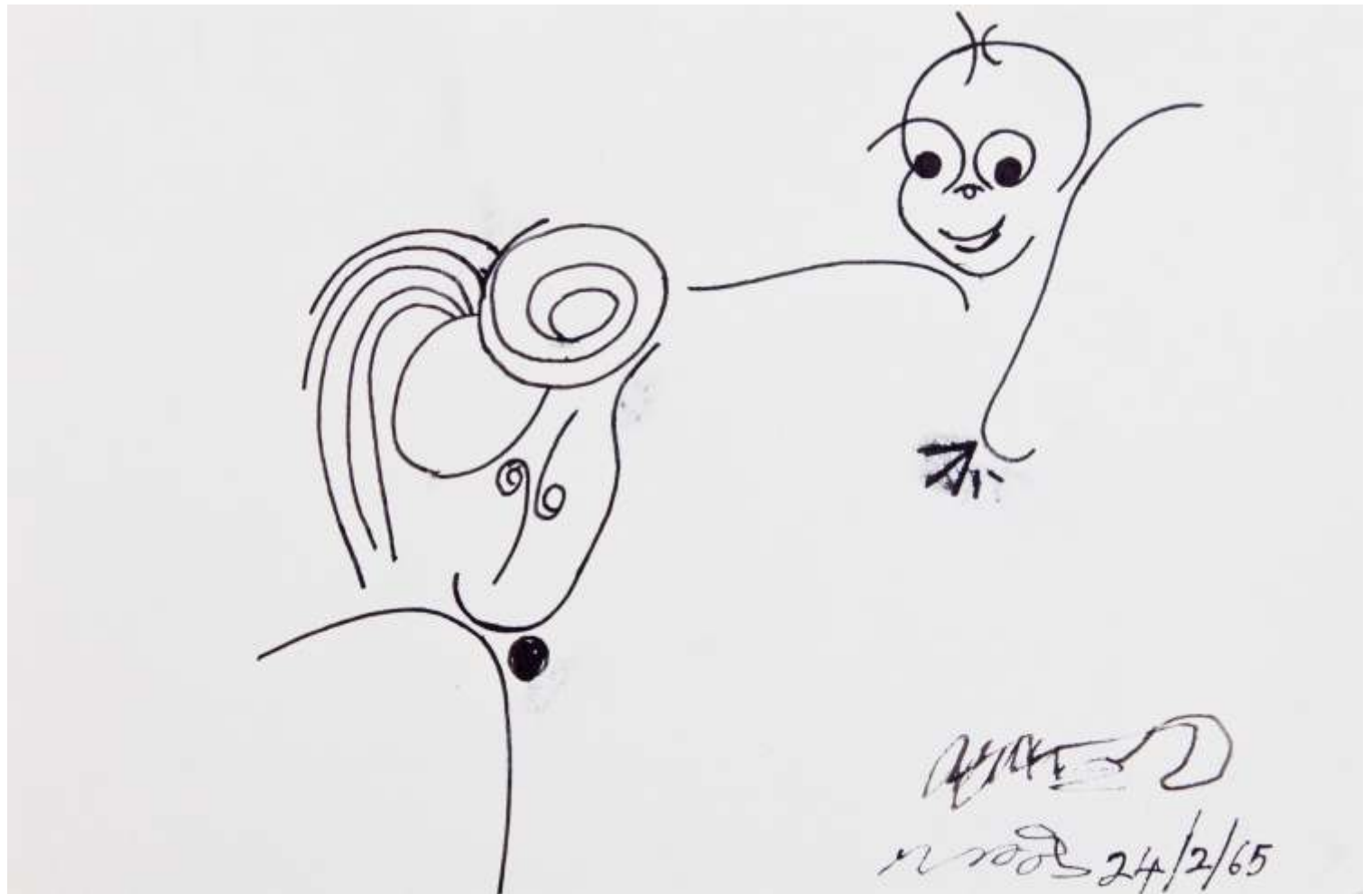




Nne Delu Nwa, Uli sketch, 1964, 25 x 18cm

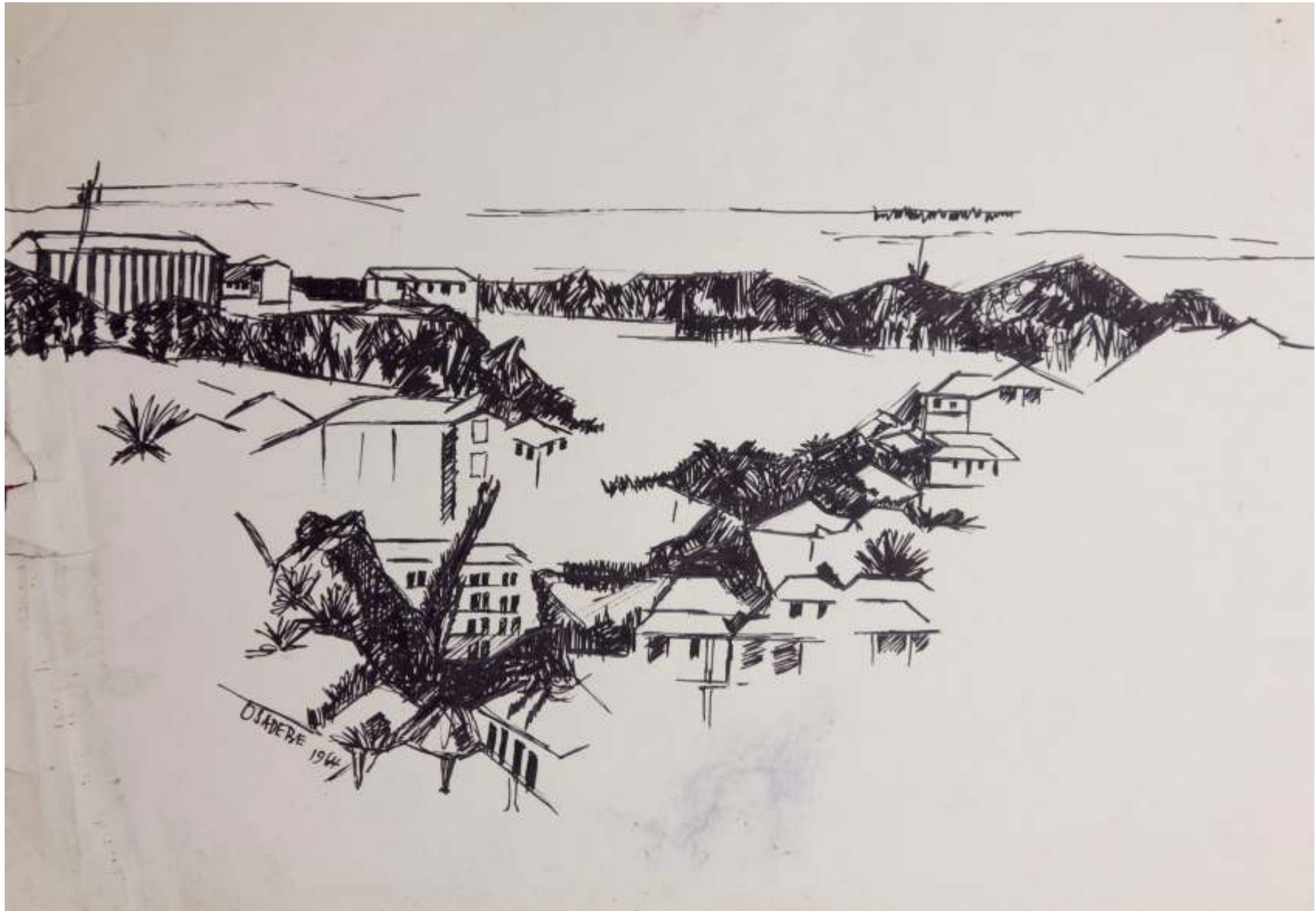


Mother & Child, Pen and ink on paper, 1960, 25.2 x 34cm



Mother & Child, Pen and ink on paper, 1965, 17 x 25.2cm

Nne Na Nwa, Uli sketch, 1964, 25 x 18cm

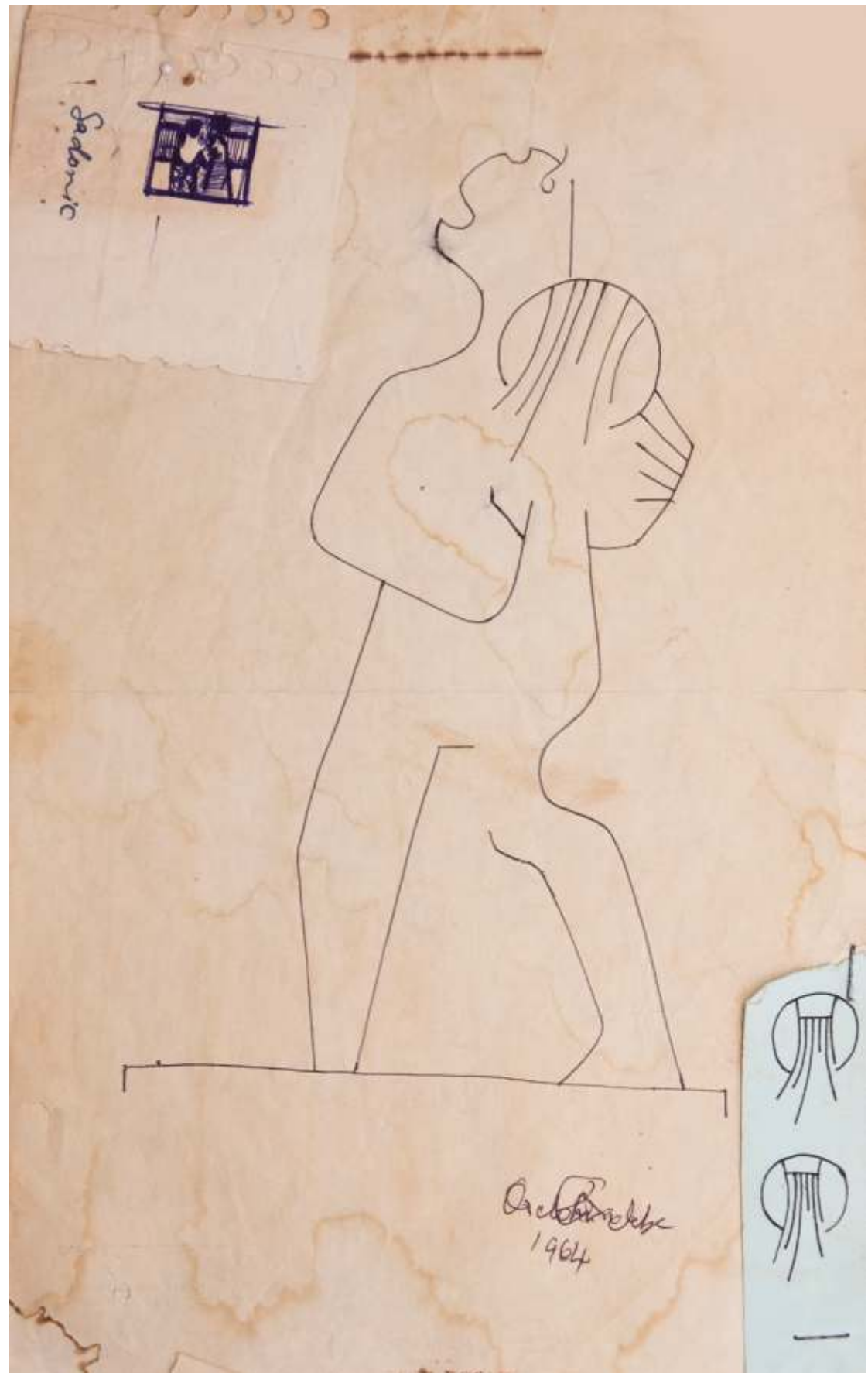


landscape, pen and ink on paper, 1964, 25.2 x 34cm

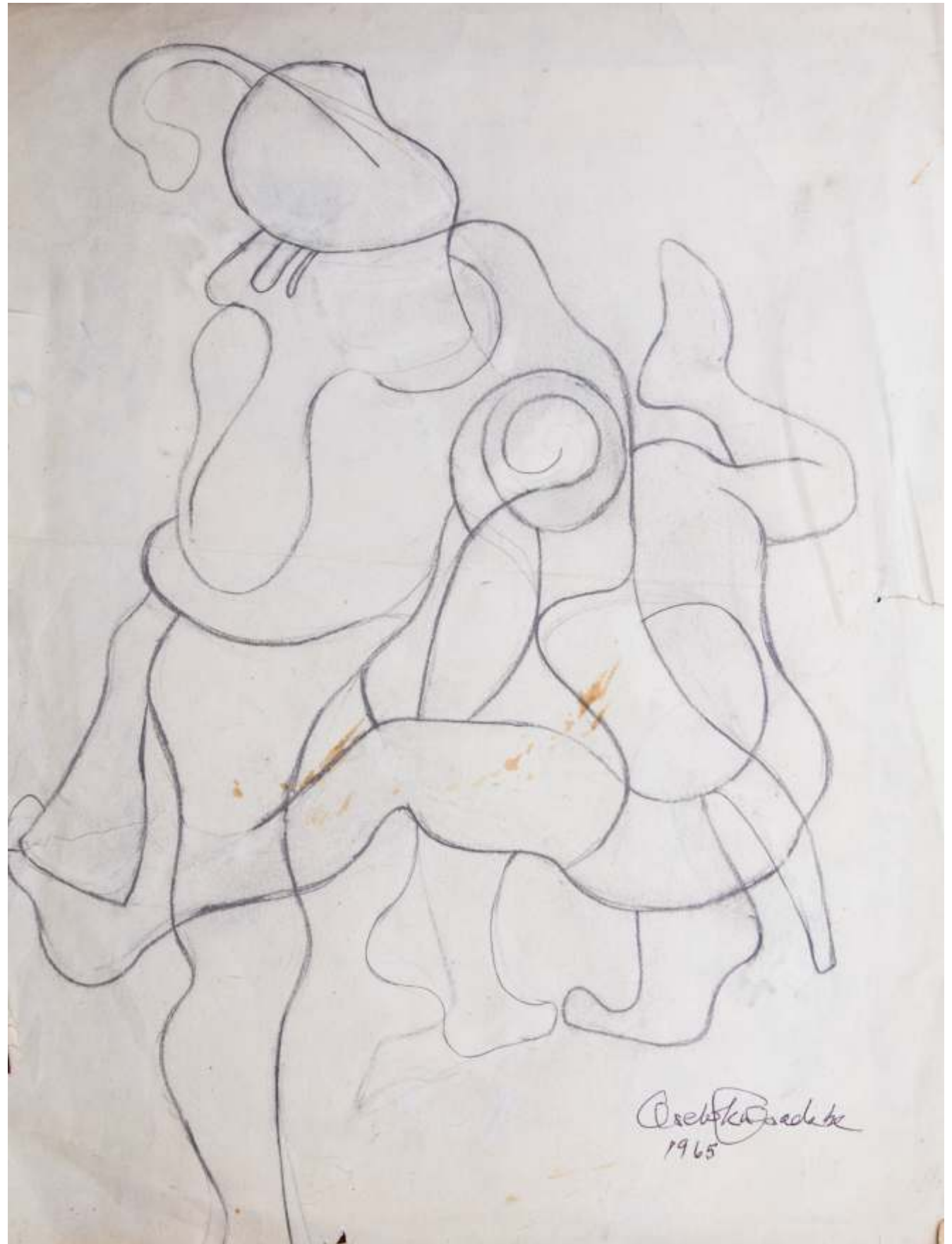




Untitled, Pen and ink on paper, 1964, 20 x 15.3cm

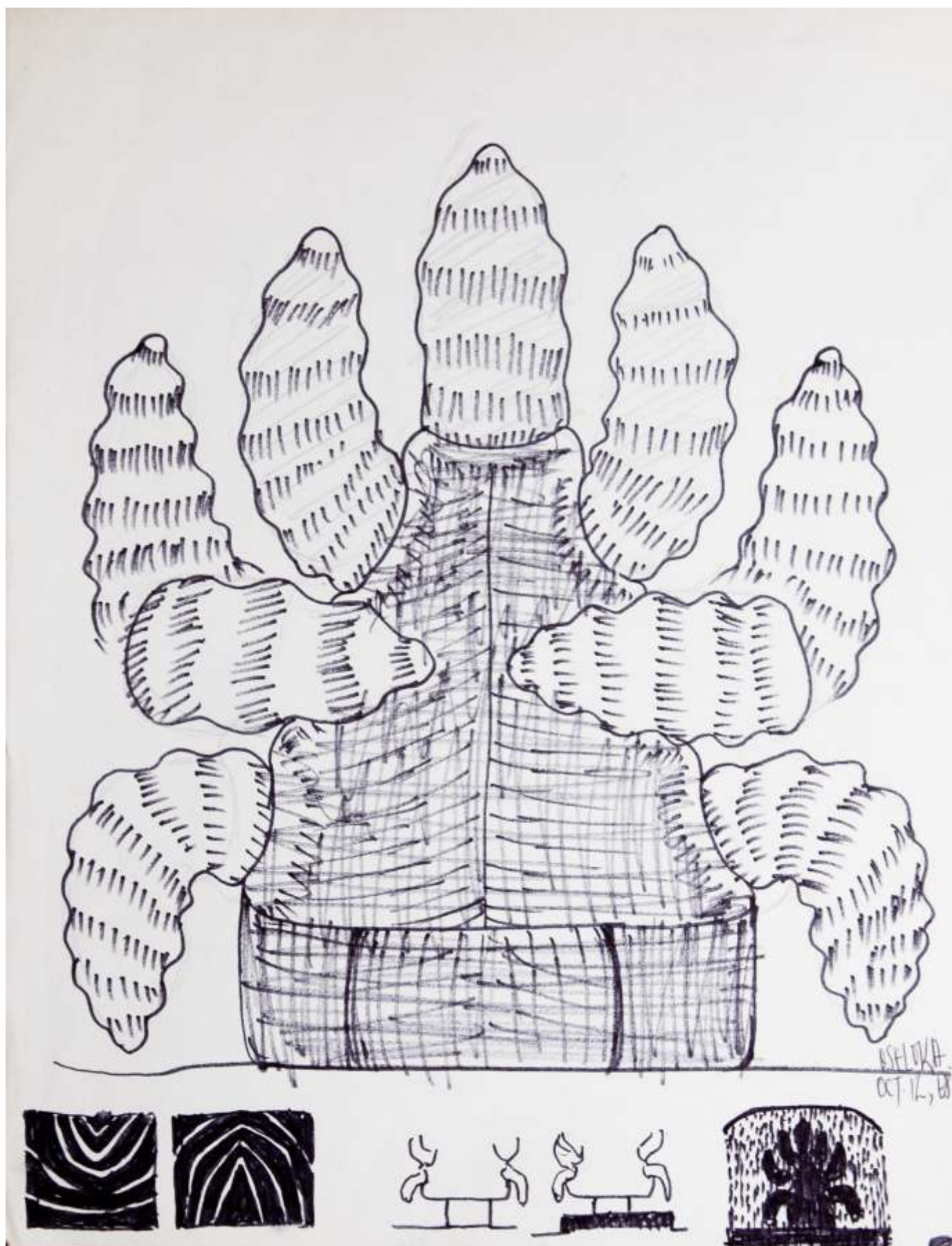


Sketch Sadonic, Pen and ink on paper, 1964, 32.5 x 20cm



Igbo Dancers, Pencil on paper, 1965, 35.5 x 27cm





Untitled, (Cactus), Uli Sketch 1968, 35.5 x 28cm





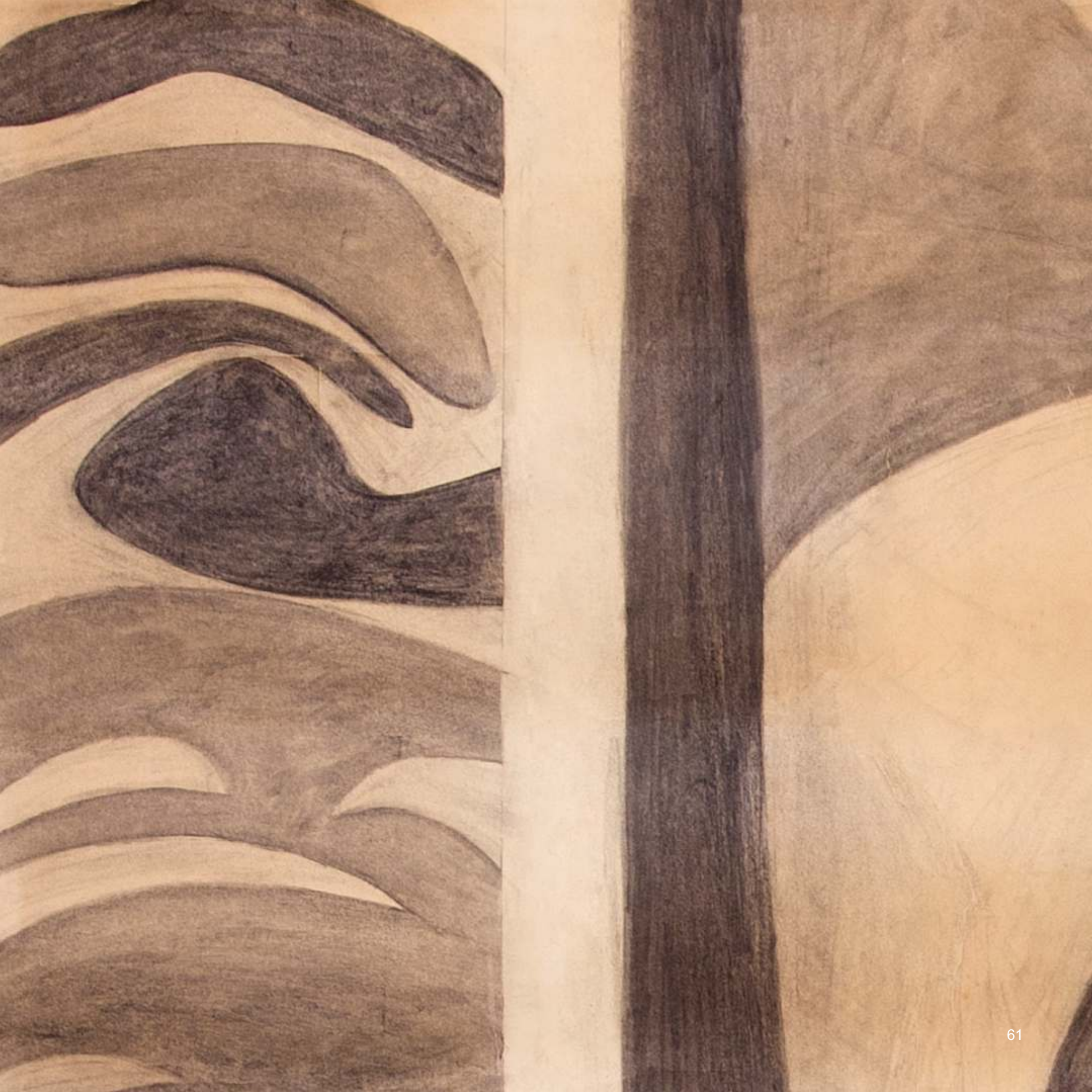
Untitled, Uli-Legere Style, Pencil or charcoal; later in silk screen, 1969, 35.5 x 26.7cm



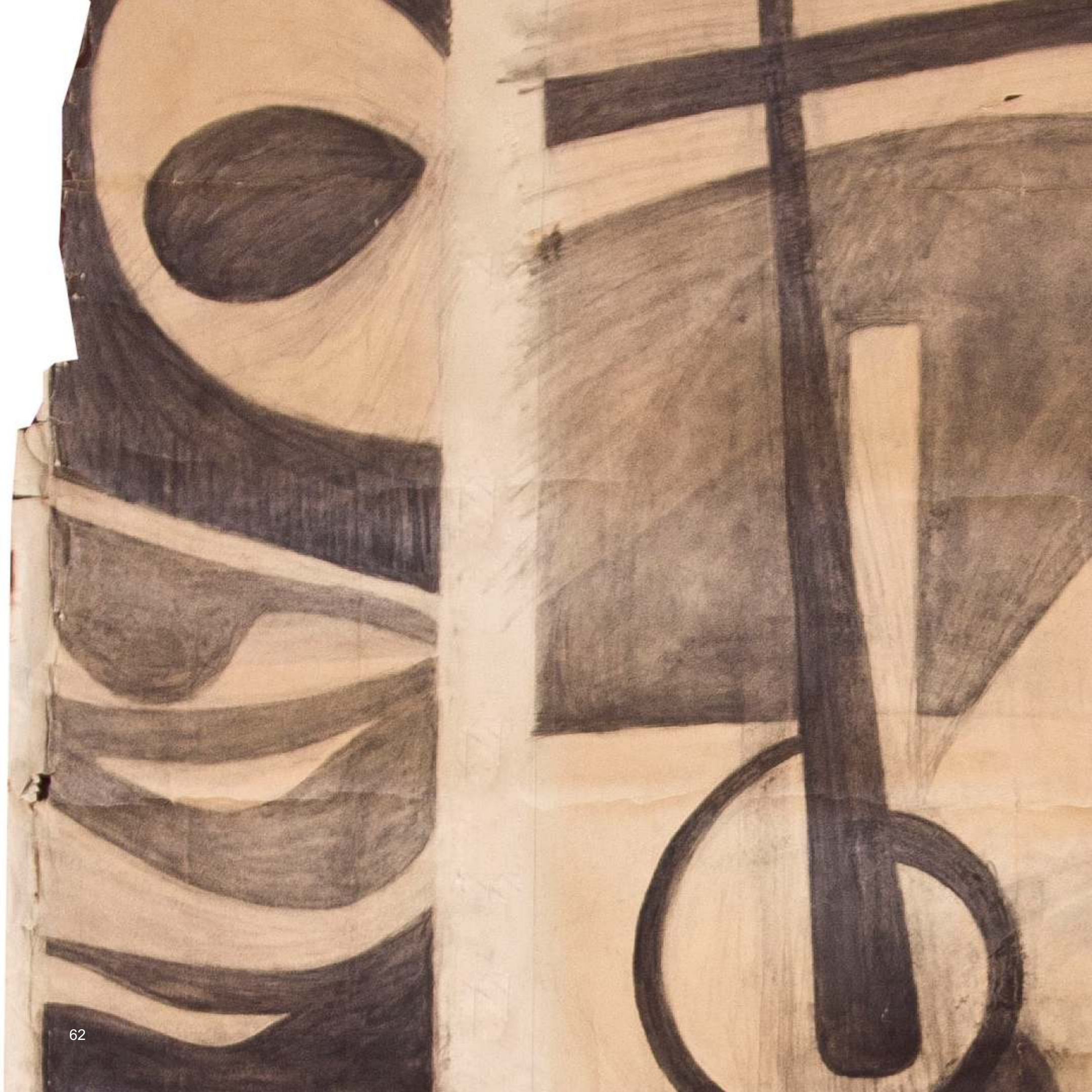
Iba (seat of family head & gathering place of family) Diptych ,  
Charcoal on Paper, 1967, 123 x 96.5cm each

Iba (seat of family head & gathering place of family) Diptych, C  
harcoal on Paper, 1967, 123 x 96.5cm each















Folklore - Bird and The man, acrylic on canvas, 1968, 125 x 80.5cm





Folklore - Bird and The man, acrylic on paper, 1973,128 x 81cm





The Milkmaids, conte crayon, 1965, 123.5 x 59.5cm







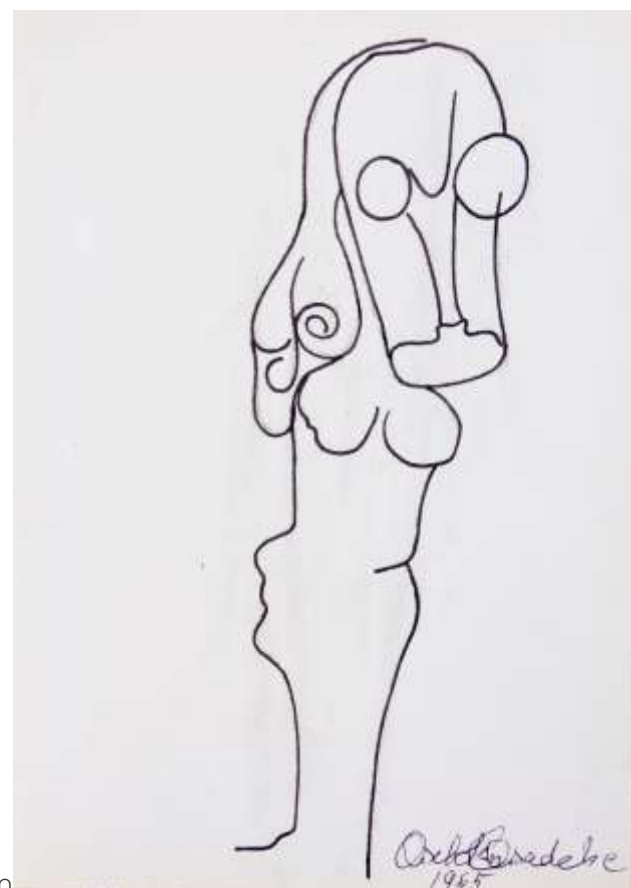
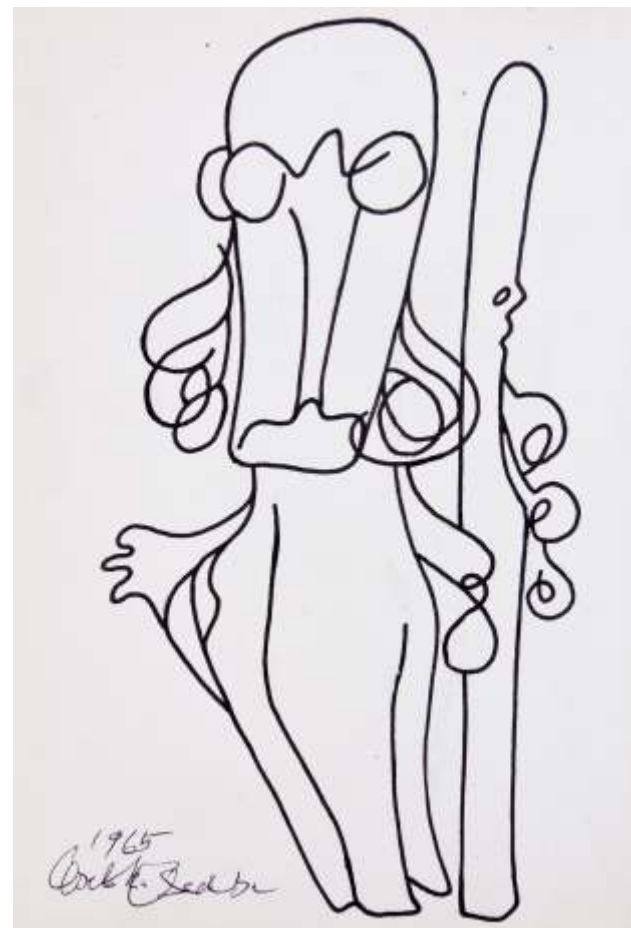
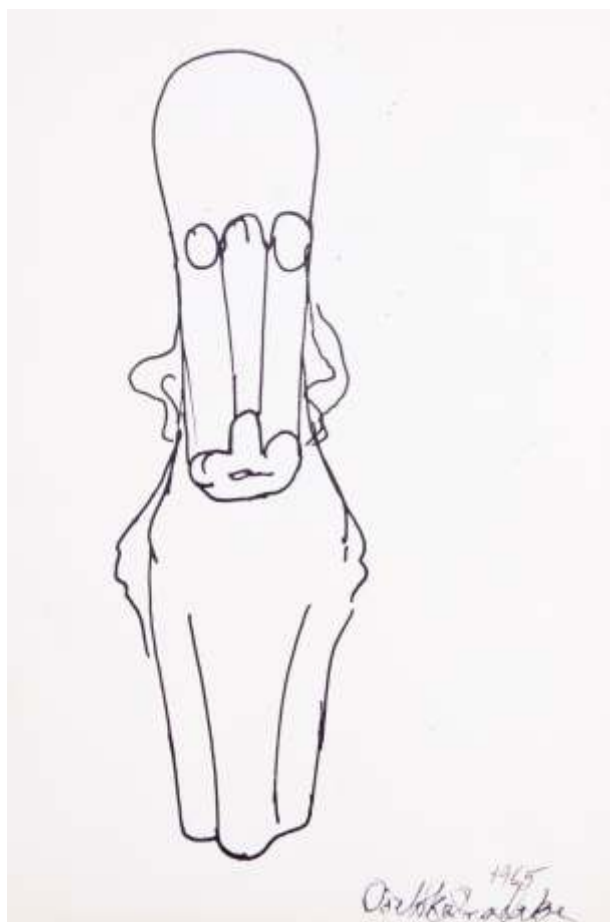
# Caricatures



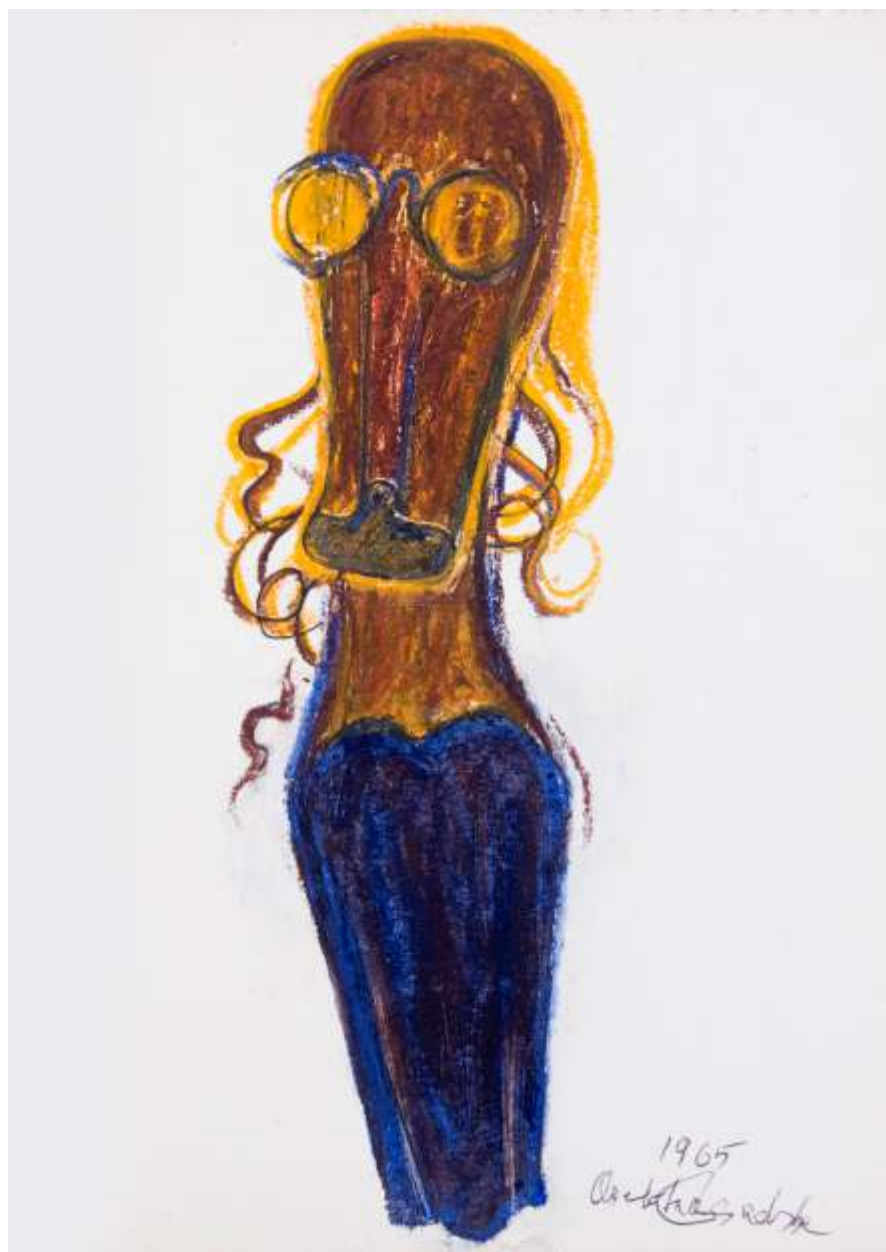


Untitled, Collage, Pen and ink on paper, 1965, 21.5 x 27.7cm

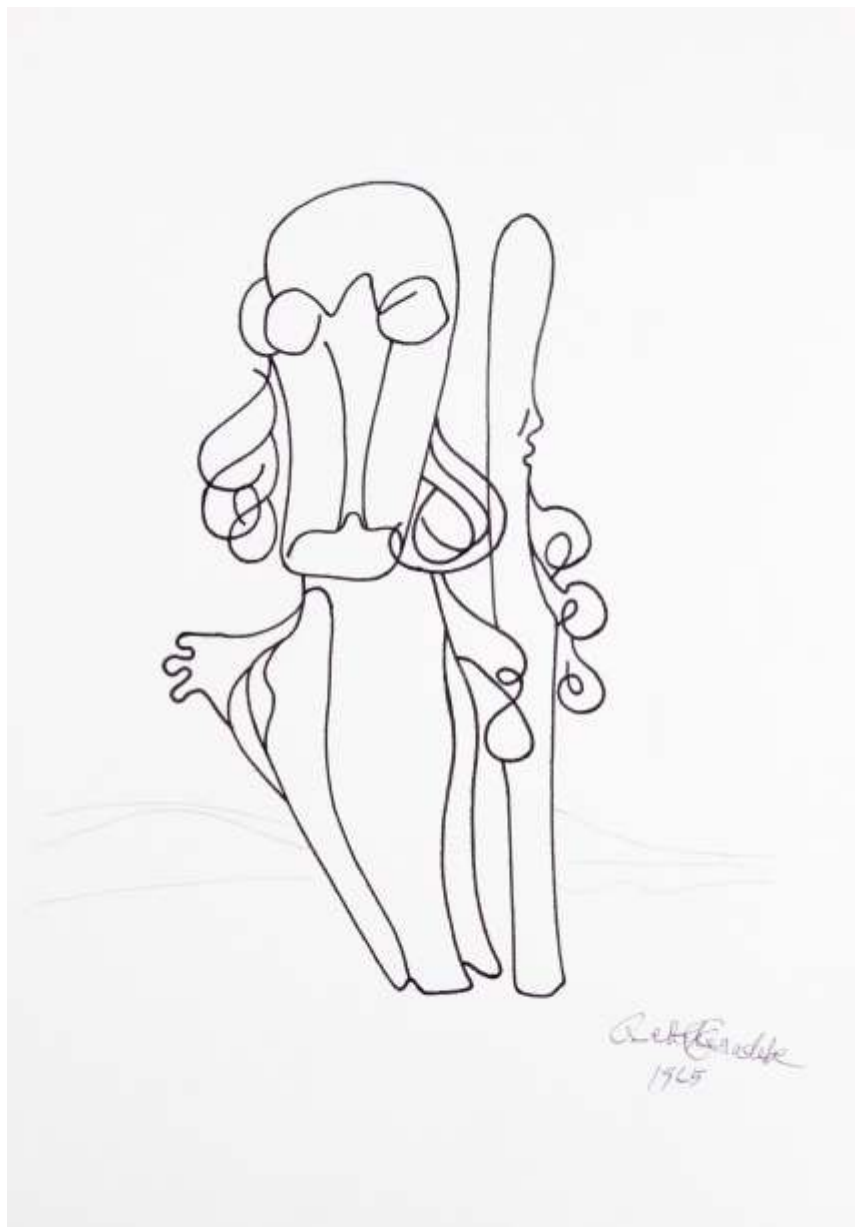
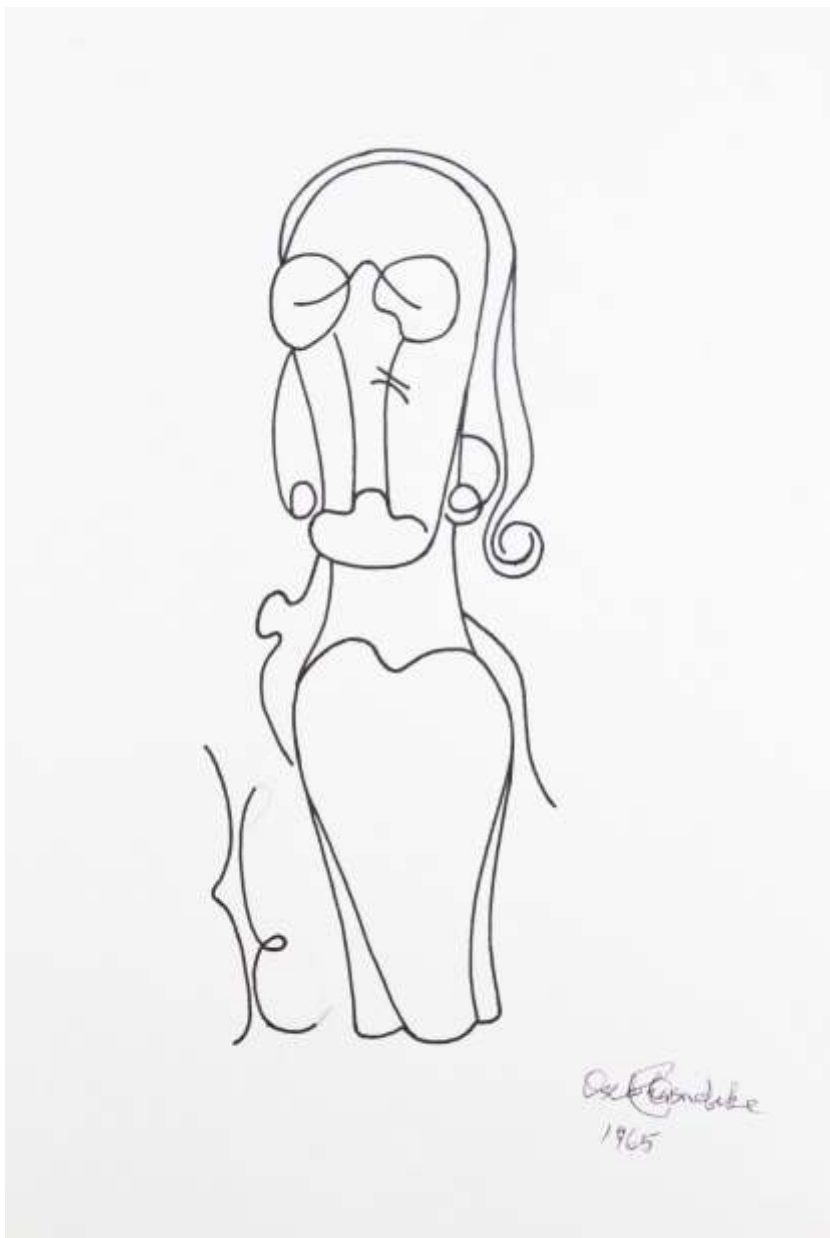




Piggly Wiggles (1-3), Pen and ink on paper, 1965, 24 x 17cm

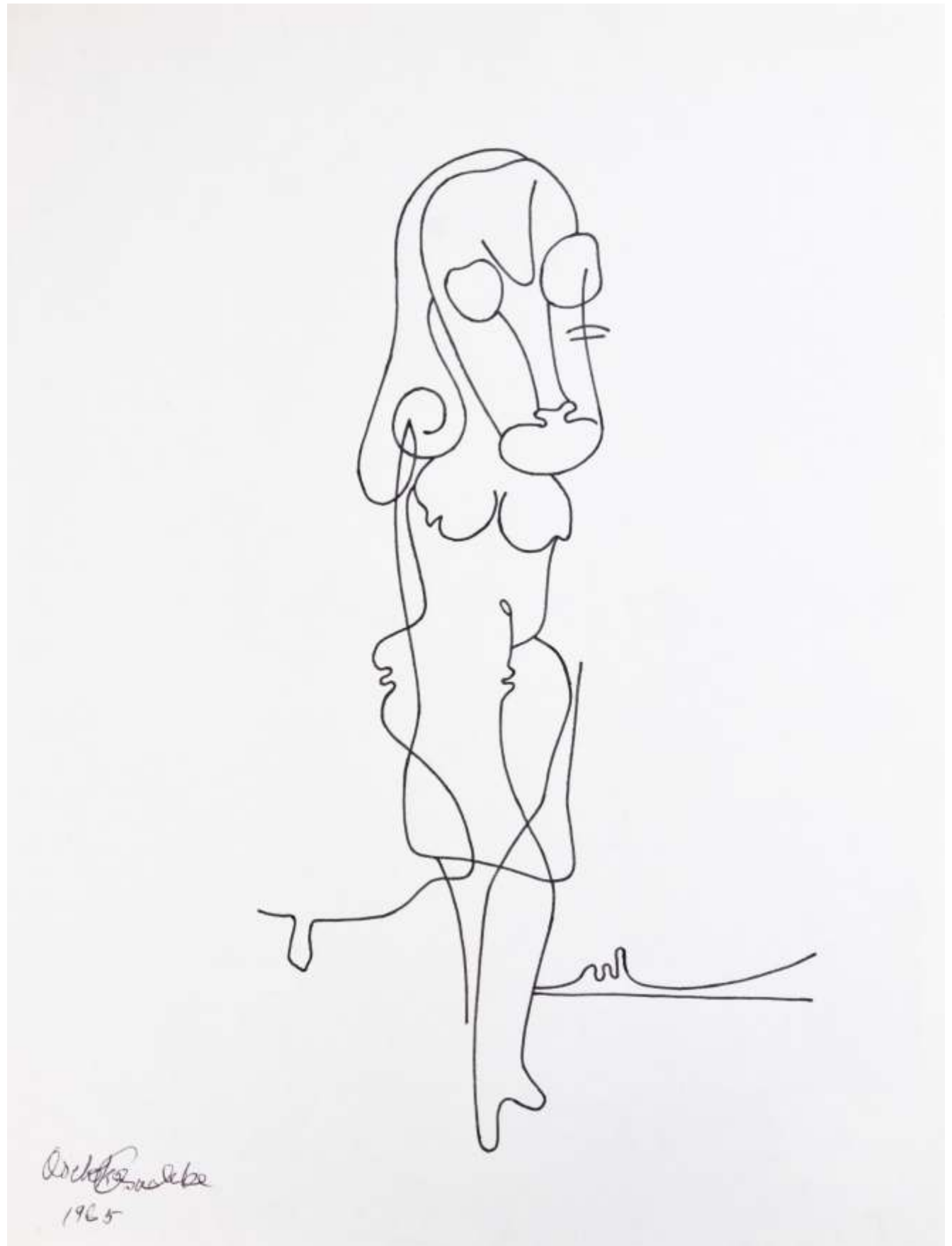


Piggly Wiggles (4-5), Pen and ink on paper, 1965, 24 x 17cm

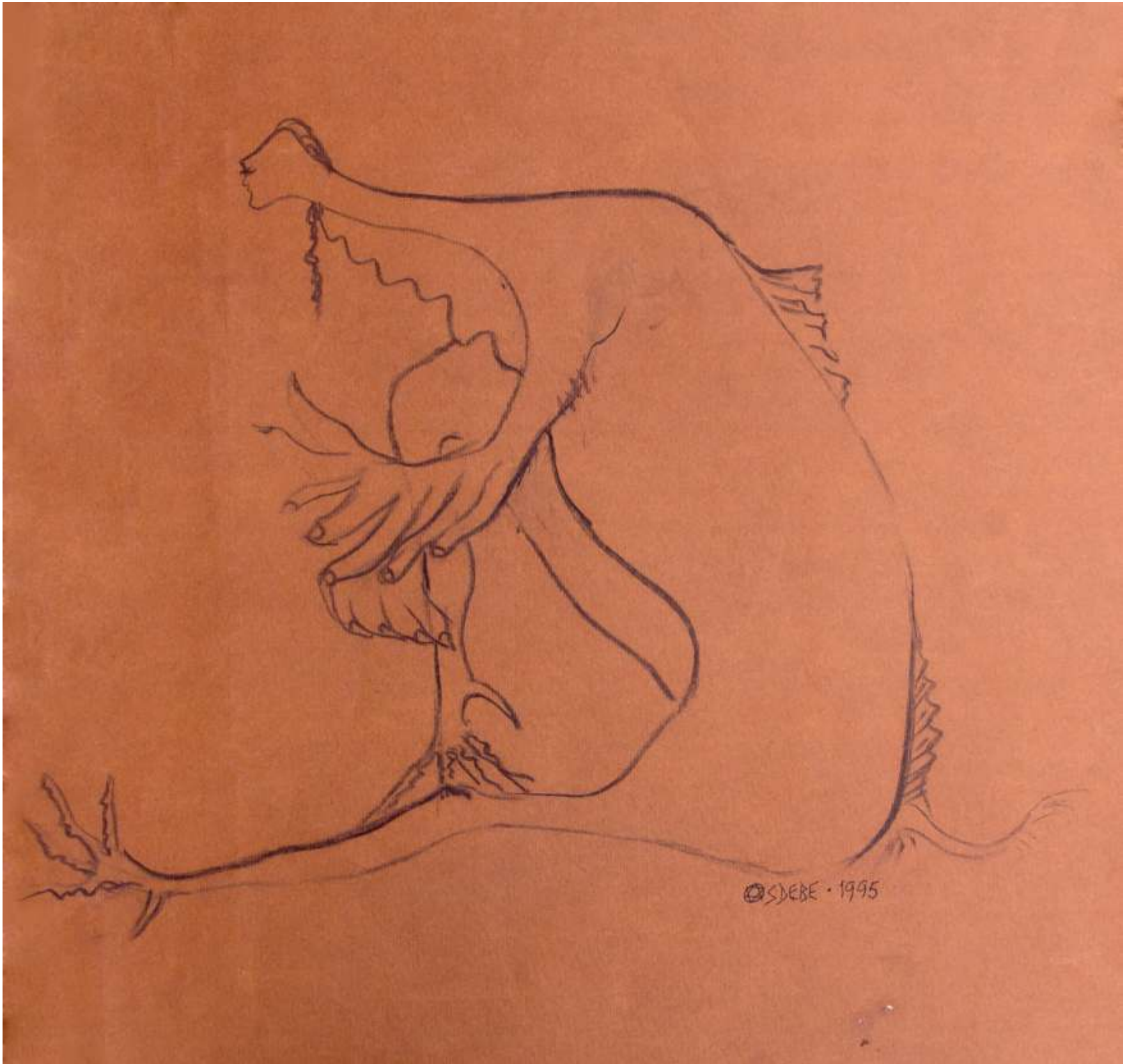


Piggly Wiggles (6-7), Pen and ink on paper, 1965, 35.5 x 28cm

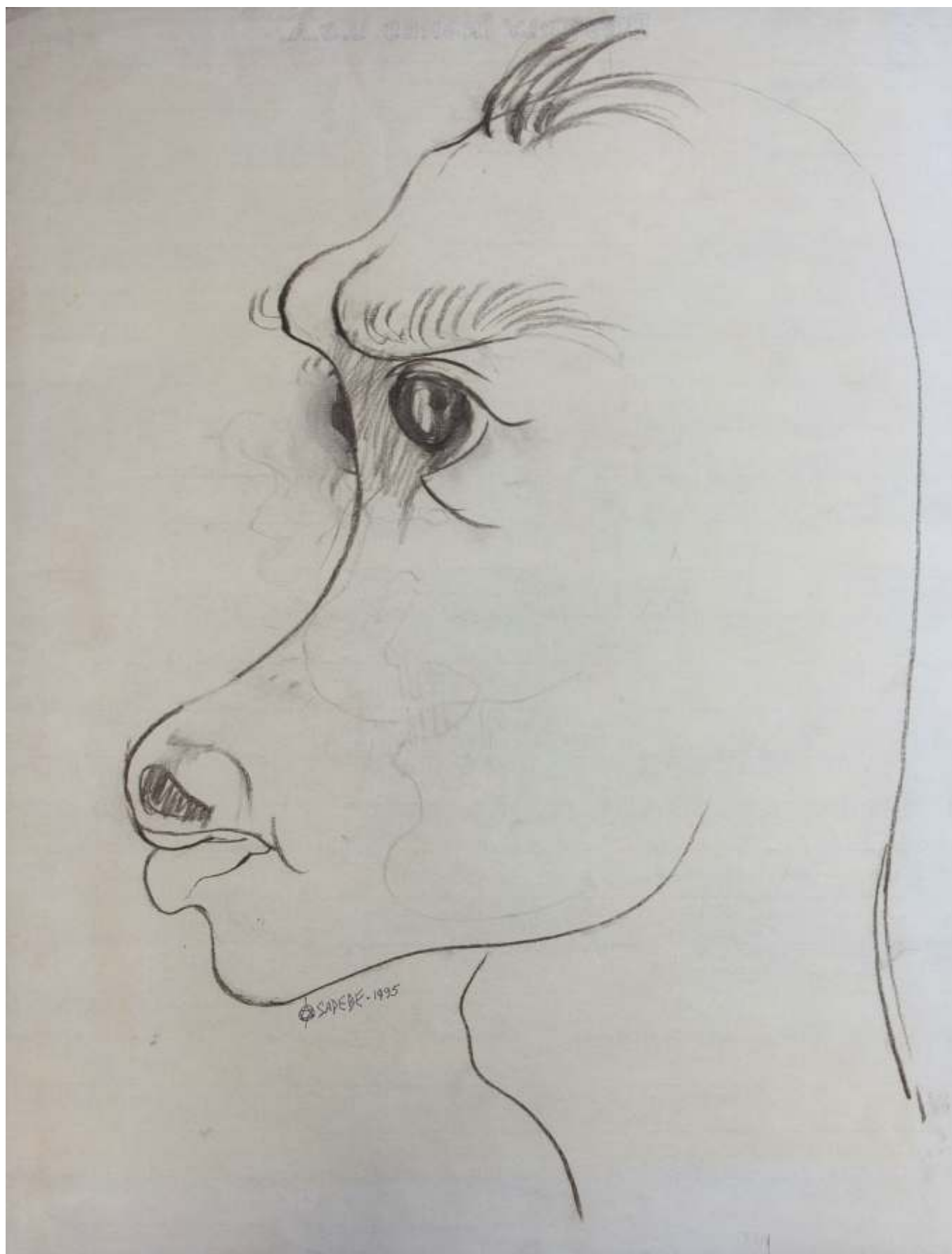




Piggy Wiggles (8), Pen and ink on paper, 1965, 35.5 x 28cm



Untitled Caricature, oil pastel on paper, 1995, 50 x 50cm

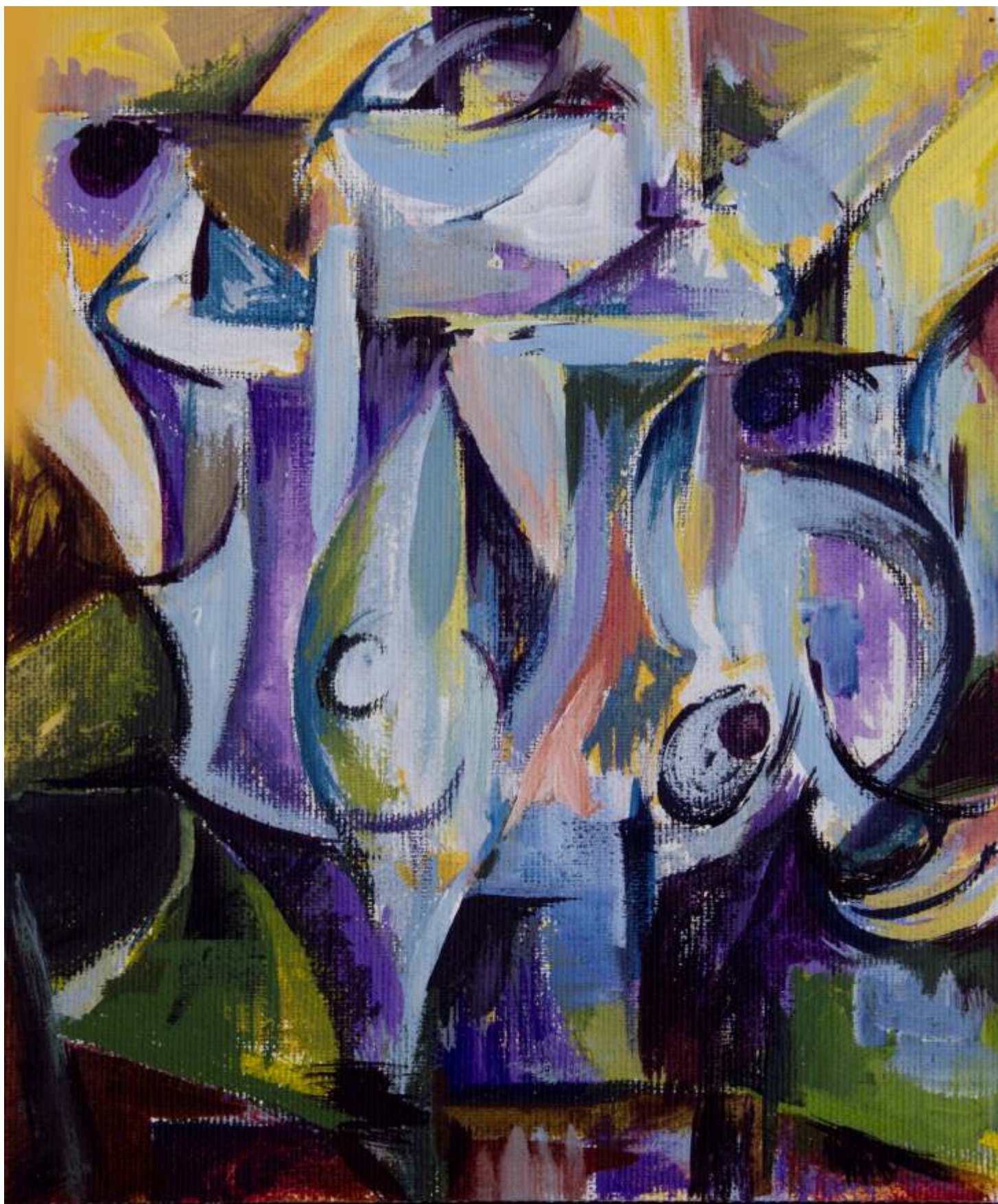


He-Man, pencil on paper, 1995, 64 x 48cm





# Stylistic Experimentation



Balla Futurism, Watercolour on paper, 1965, 28 x 22cm





Synthetic Picasso 1921, watercolour on paper, 1965, 28 x 22cm



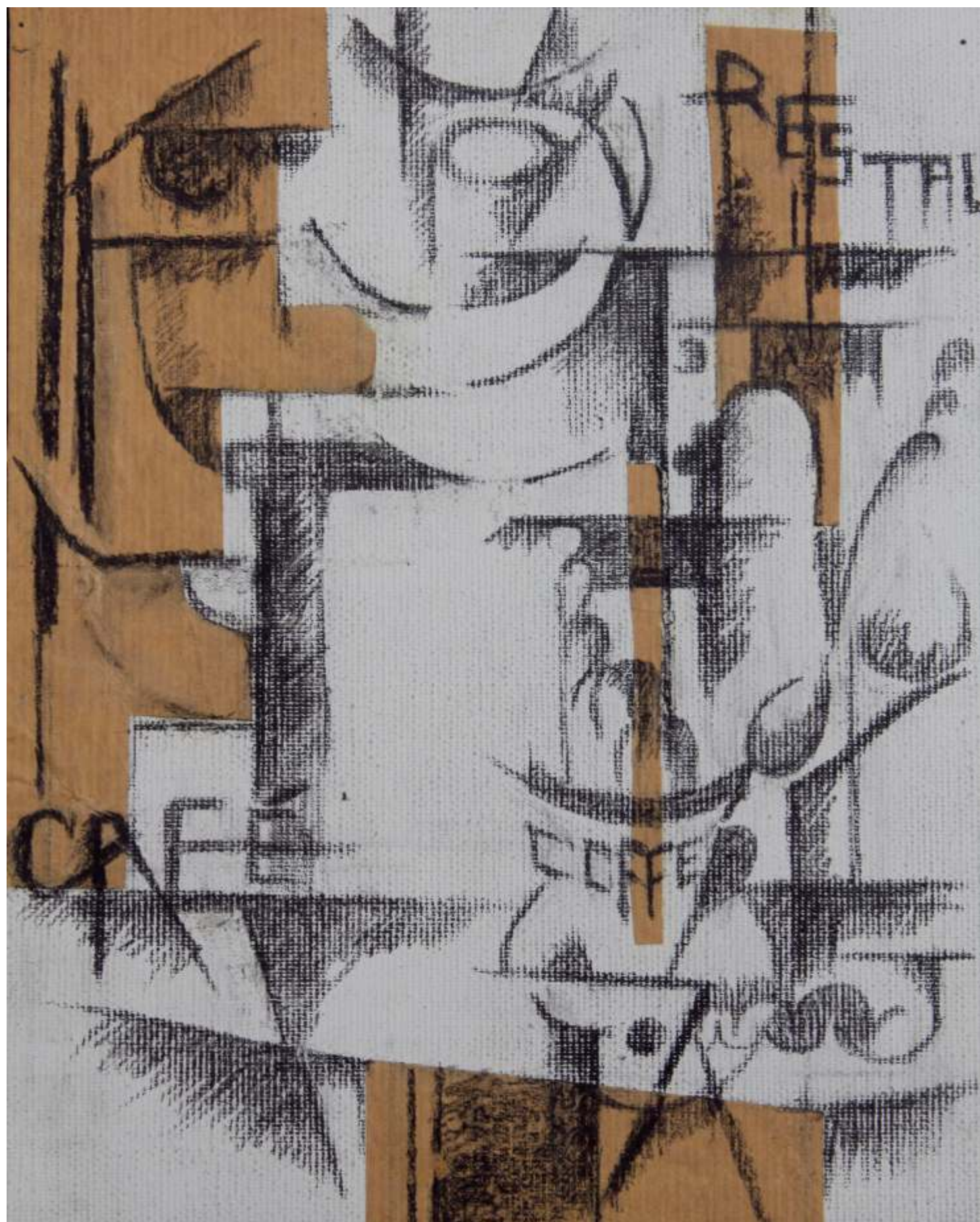


Coffee Pot Braque 1908, watercolour on paper, 1965, 28 x 22cm

Braque 1910, watercolour on paper, 1965, 28 x 22cm

Collage Braque 1912, watercolour on paper, 1965, 28 x 22cm









# Human Forms







Female form, pencil on paper, 1964-1965, 61 x 46cm



Female form, oil color pastel on white paper, 1967-1968, 61 x 46cm



Male form, oil pastel on brown paper, 1975, 92 x 62cm





Human form, pencil on paper, 1972, 43 x 35.5cm

Male form, pencil on paper, 1972, 43 x 35.5cm



Human form, pencil on paper, 1972, 43 x 35.5cm



Male form (back), pencil on white paper, 1979, 45 x 60cm

Male form (front), pencil on paper, 1979, 45 x 60cm





Female form, pencil on paper, 1974, 60 x 45cm

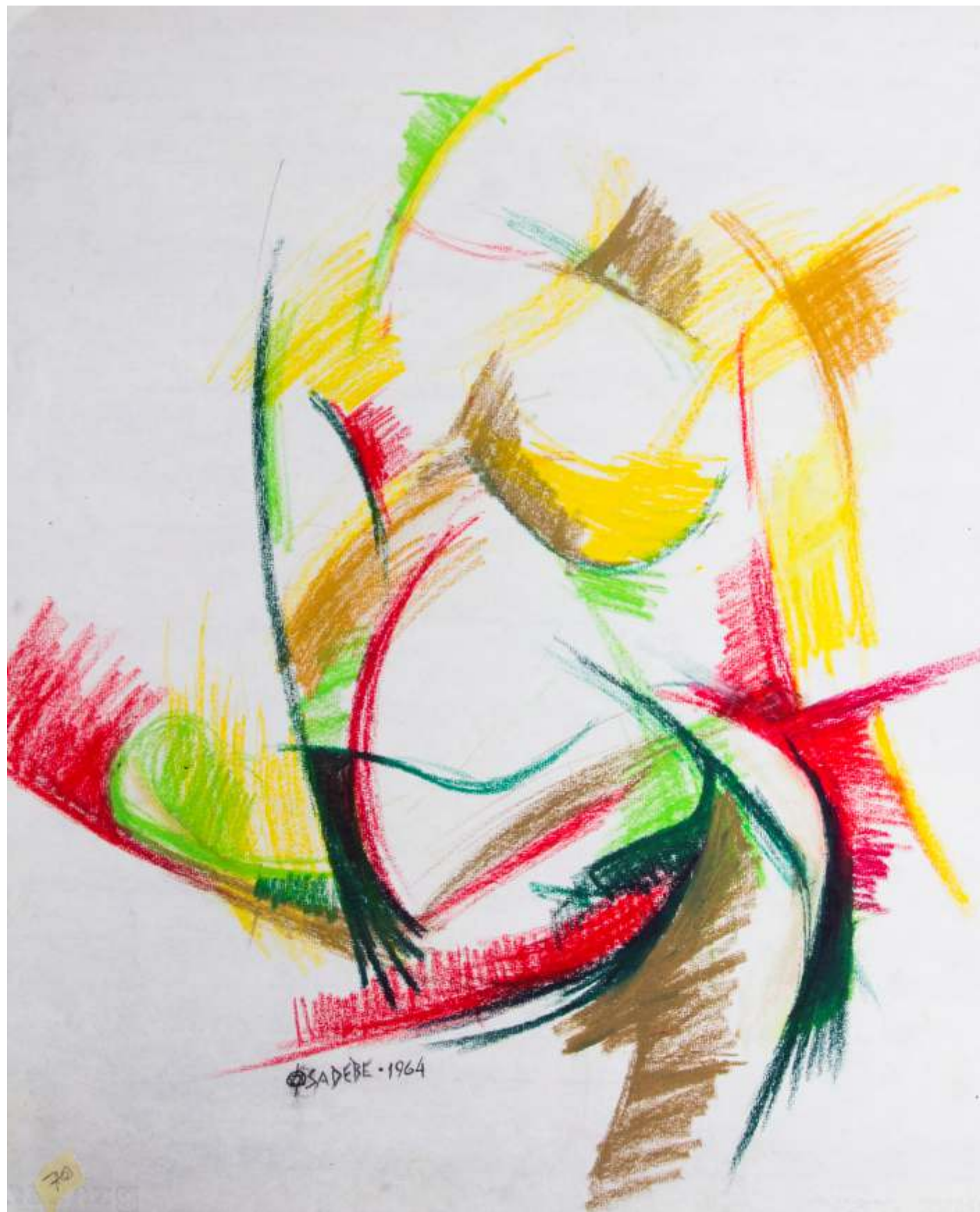


Male form, oil pastel on colored paper, 1995, 45 x 60cm



Male form (Akimbo), oil color pastel on white paper, 1995, 60 x 45cm





Male form, oil pastel on colored paper, 1964, 63.5 x 48.5cm



Untitled, black and red crayon strokes on white paper, 1967, 48.5 x 64cm





Untitled, oil pastel on linen paper, 1975, 76 x 56 cm





Untitled, oil pastel on colored paper, 2010, 60 x 45cm



Untitled, oil pastel on linen paper, 1973, 75.5 x 66cm





Untitled, oil pastel on linen paper, 1973, 76 x 56 cm





Untitled, oil pastel on dark brown paper, 1974, 60 x 55.5cm







Theatre



Raisin in the sun, Theatre poster, drawing, 1985, 43.5 x 56cm

Simply Heaven, Theatre poster, drawing, 1986, 56 x 43cm

Steal Away, Theatre poster, drawing, 1988, 56.5 x 41.5cm



**SPELMAN COLLEGE DRAMA DEPARTMENT**

**PRESENTS**

**RAMONA KING'S**

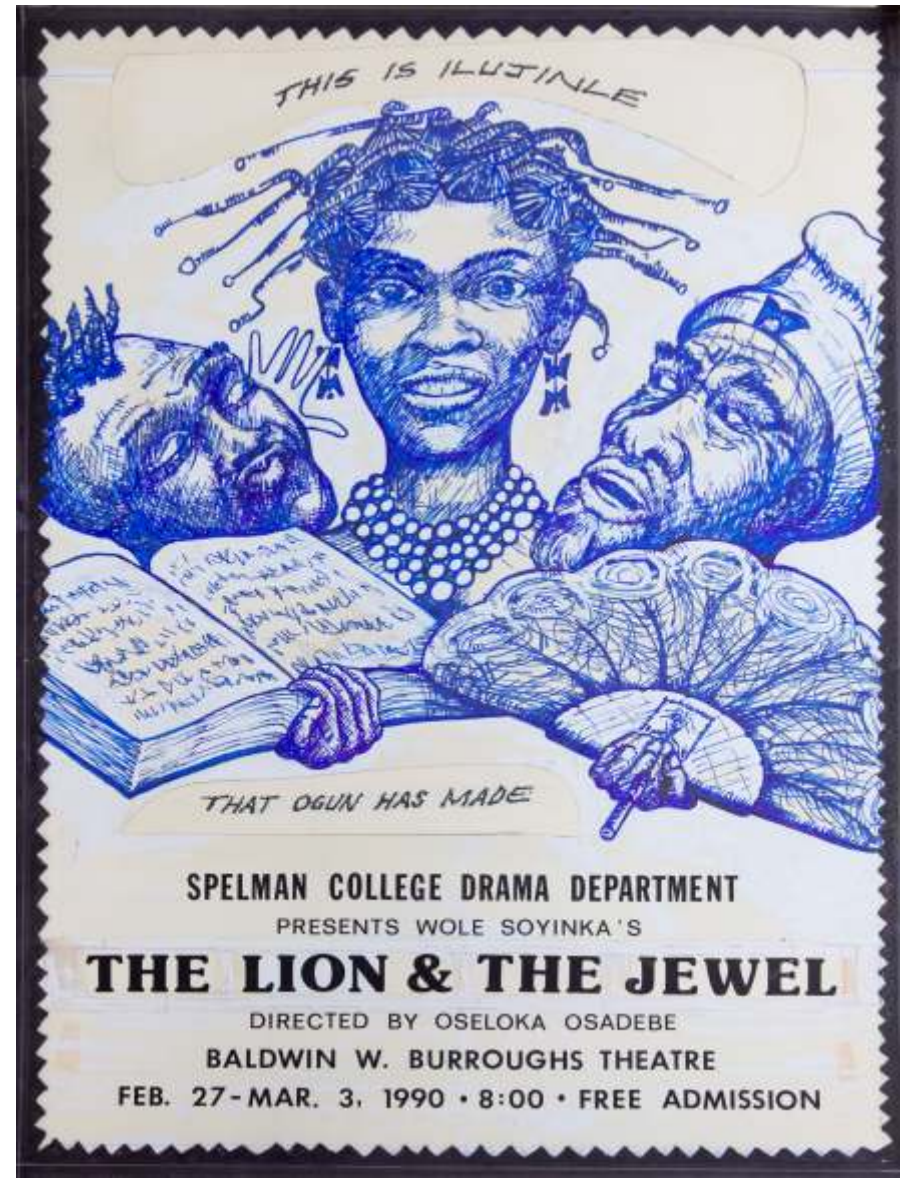
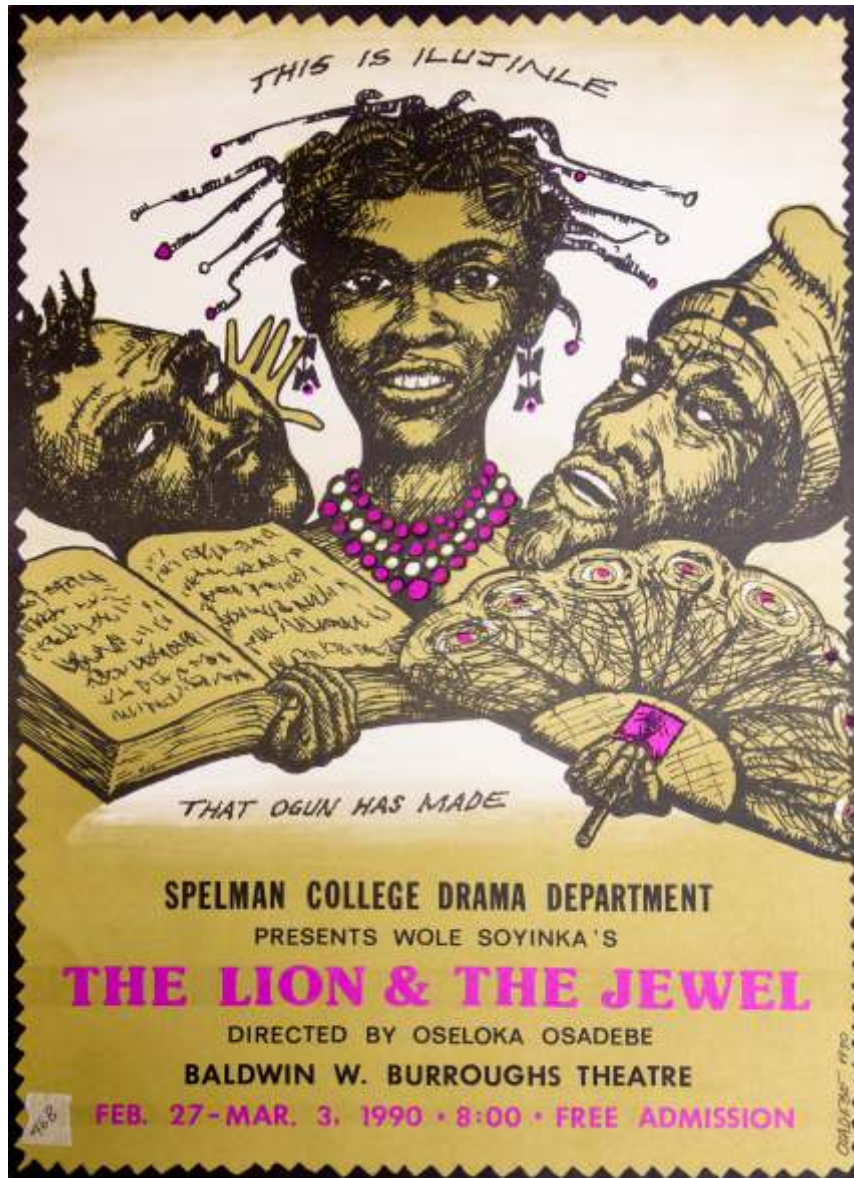
# **STEAL AWAY**

**DIRECTED BY LUNDEANA THOMAS**

**BALDWIN W. BURROUGHS THEATRE**

**NOVEMBER 1-5, 1988 • 8:00 • FREE ADMISSION**





The Lion and Jewel (1 & 2), Theatre poster, drawing, 1990, 56 x 40.5cm

The Colored Musuem, Theatre poster, drawing, 1998, 43 x 28cm



THE DIVISION OF HUMANITIES  
TOUGALOO COLLEGE



NKISI PLAYERS  
IN

NKISI  
PLAYERS

# SEE THE BEST OF THE COLORED MUSEUM & DIE!



**THE COLORED MUSEUM**

BY GEORGE C. WOLFE

DIRECTED BY

OSELOKA O. OSADEBE

APRIL 14 & 15, 1998

8:00 P.M.

BALLARD THEATER

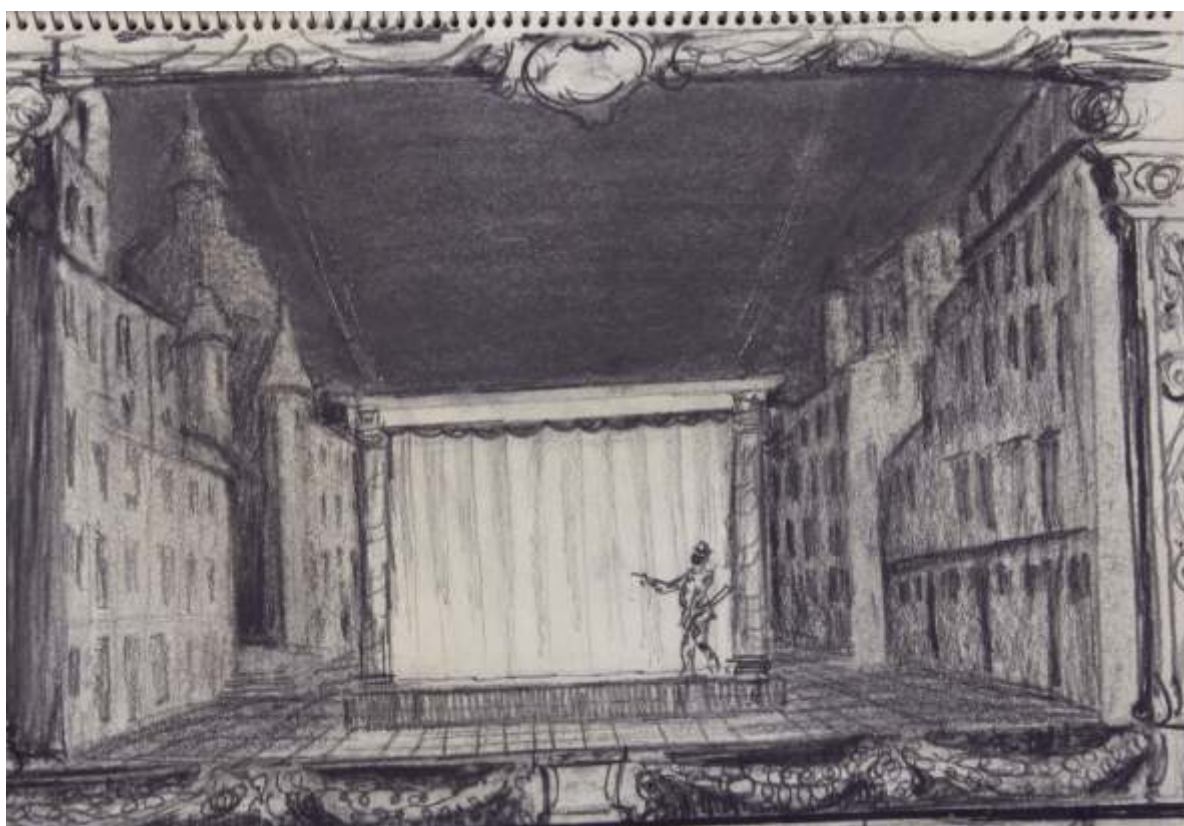
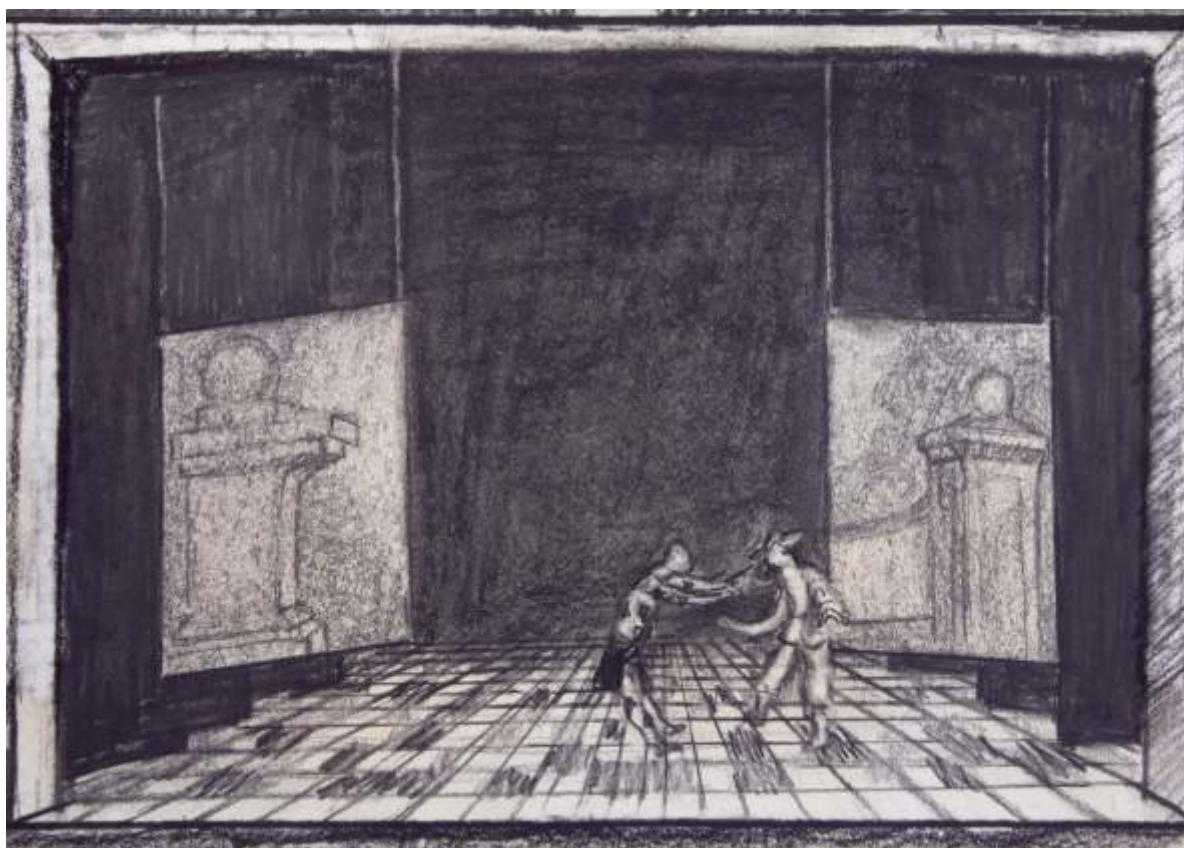
OSADEBE, 1998







Faust in Africa, charcoal and fixative on paper, 1971, 48.5 x 63.5cm



Untitled, charcoal on paper, 1972, 43.1 x 35.5cm (2)  
 Untitled, charcoal on paper, 1972, 43.1 x 35.5cm



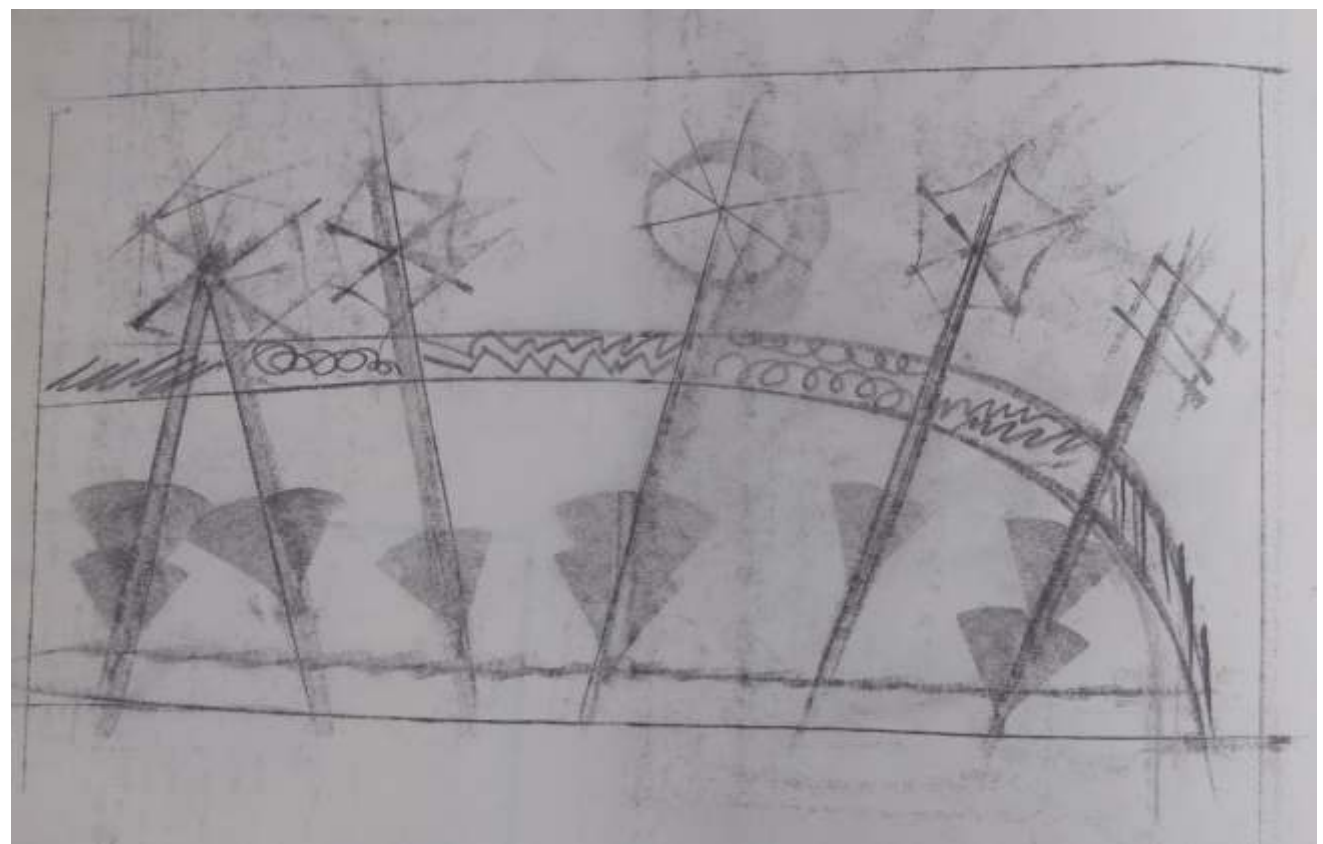
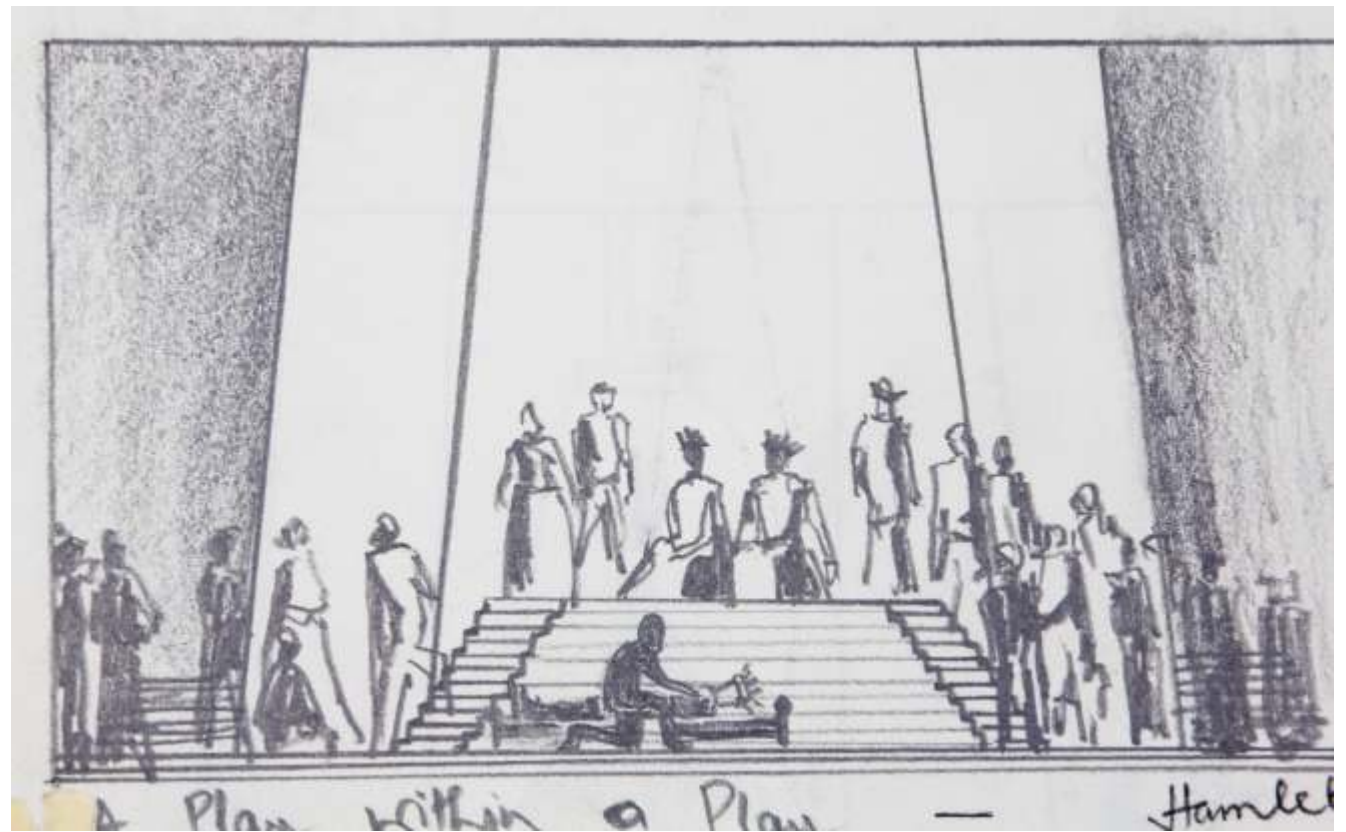


(64)Untitled, Charcoal and Fixative on White Paper,42.5 x 68.5cm



The judgement of Adam & Eve (1 & 2) - Genesis chap on paper, 1972, 28 x 35.5cm

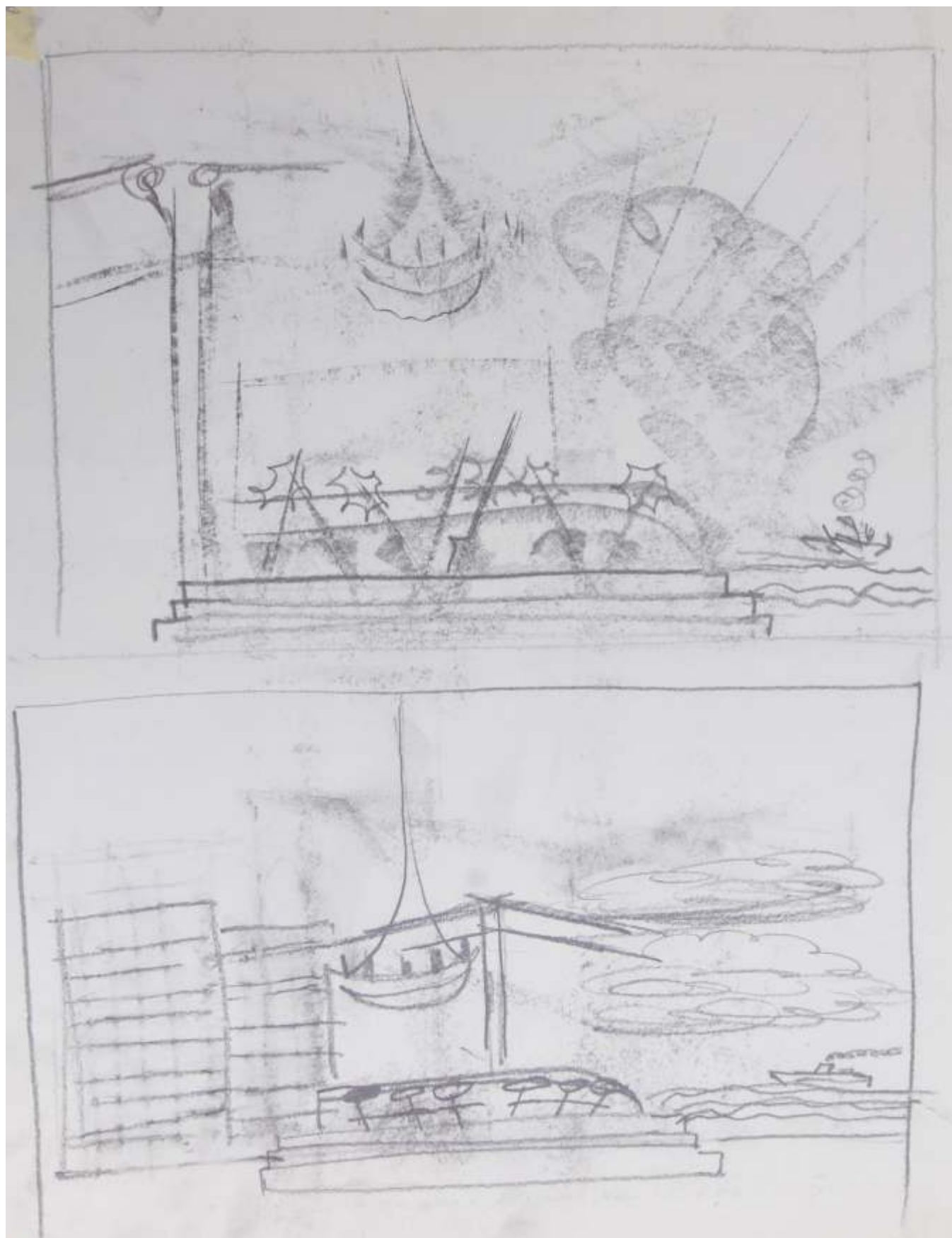




Untitled, pencil on paper, 35.5 x 27.8cm

Untitled, pencil on paper, 43.1 x 35.5cm





Untitled, pencil on paper, 43.1 x 35.5cm



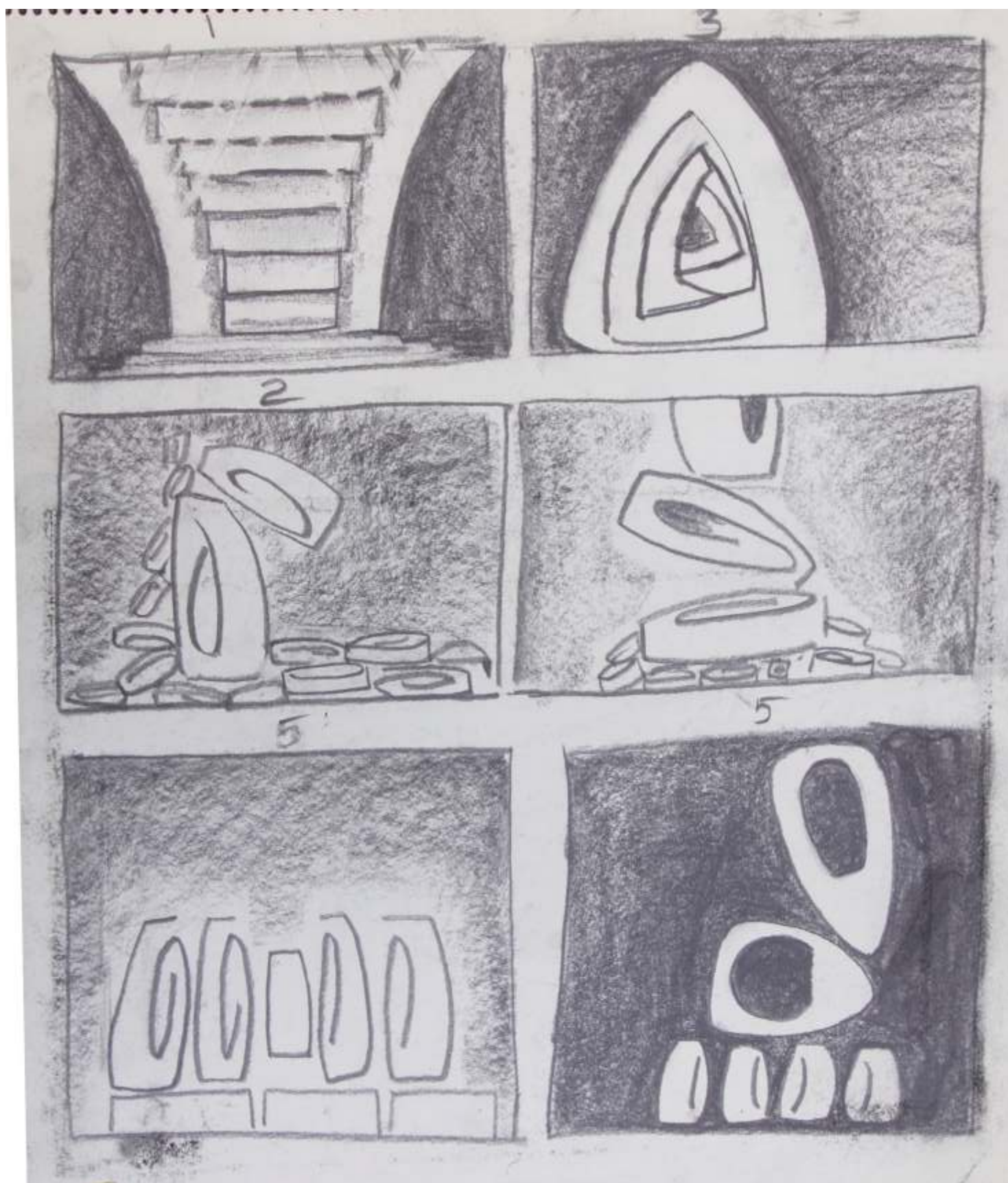
Oedipus Rex(Exodus), charcoal on paper, 1972, 35.5 x 22.5cm



Untitled, charcoal on paper, 1972, 43.2 x 35.5cm







Untitled, pencil on paper, 43.1 x 35.5cm



Untitled, wax crayon on paper, 1972, 43.1 x 35.5cm





Untitled, wax crayon on paper, 1972, 43.1 x 35.5cm





Untitled-Doodling of Sun Rays, oil pastel on white paper, 1973, 60.5 x 40.5cm



Energy Fields, crayon and charcoal on paper, 35.5 x 22cm





# Inner Light

AS LONG AS THE OUTER MAN  
REMAINS TOLERANT, KIND, LOVING,  
UNSELFISH, AND HIGH IN IDEALS, HE  
NEEDS ONLY TO ASK **FOR** HELP  
FROM THE INNER, SPIRITUAL  
PLANE, AND IT IS GIVEN.

NINTH D., P.  
MONO. TWO.



# ARTIST STATEMENT

No one can escape the menacing intrusions of counterforces, be they internal psychological demons, human antagonists, or the celebrated intruder, Satan himself. They do immeasurable damage to human aspirations. Suffice it to say that they are “on call” 24/7 in the life of every human being. Not even Jesus, the Christ, was exempt from any such encroachments. But if one chooses to fight it out with intruders, and to fight with firm purpose, one is apt to surmount any such intrusion, at least momentarily. And each time one triumphs, there is a reward of unusual, spiritual significance. An inner light glows, enveloping the individual’s body, especially the head and shoulder areas. In essence, this signal of triumph is the aura, the light of the Inner Being. Deeply moved by this triumphal manifestation, I decided to title the artwork *Inner Light*.

## From Theme to Creative Art

Apparent in the above-stated theme are two opposing conditions: “intrusion” and “resistance”; in other words, the antagonist and the protagonist. Satan is the antagonist while the resister is the protagonist. The protagonist’s name is “Everyman”, generally speaking. He is so named because he is every human being.

## The Two-Dimensional Rendering

The powerful representation of the Everyman/Satan confrontation depicted in the 27 x 44 inches Conté crayon drawing is actually a pair of actions, spliced to form a composite unit. In one action, Satan physically and mentally attacks Everyman, to hinder him from attaining his goal of enhancing his spiritual beauty and power. For a moment, Satan seems to have the upper hand. But in the second action, Everyman’s resistance causes Satan to suffer a setback and defeat. Now Everyman prevails!

So my composite picture shows Satan still in his initial attack stance, but that is only to reflect his image in the first action. On the other hand, Everyman displays a second stalwart image, indicative of his victory in the second action. As a result of his triumph over Satan, the Inner Light is glowing around Everyman’s head, and spectacularly, the skin on his face begins to peel off, revealing another face: that of the Inner Being. Surely, Satan has been vanquished, at least for a while.

All in all, the symbolic and literal characterisations of Everyman and Satan, the images of the two characters during their hard-fought battles for dominance, and, of course, the unpredictable reversal of Satan’s fortune, all combine to make *Inner Light* a deeply meaningful and entertaining work of art.





Inner light, conte crayon on paper, 1965, 98.5 x 68cm





Inner light, conte crayon on paper, 1981, 91 x 62cm





Inner Light, conte crayon on board, 2013, 123 x 80.5cm





# Fallen From Grace



Fallen From Grace, pen and ink on paper, 1972 - 1976, 93 x 96cm



Fallen From Grace, watercolour on paper, 1972 - 1976, 93.5 x 93.5cm





# Tree of Life







Tree of life, silk screen, 1964, 22.5 x 15cm



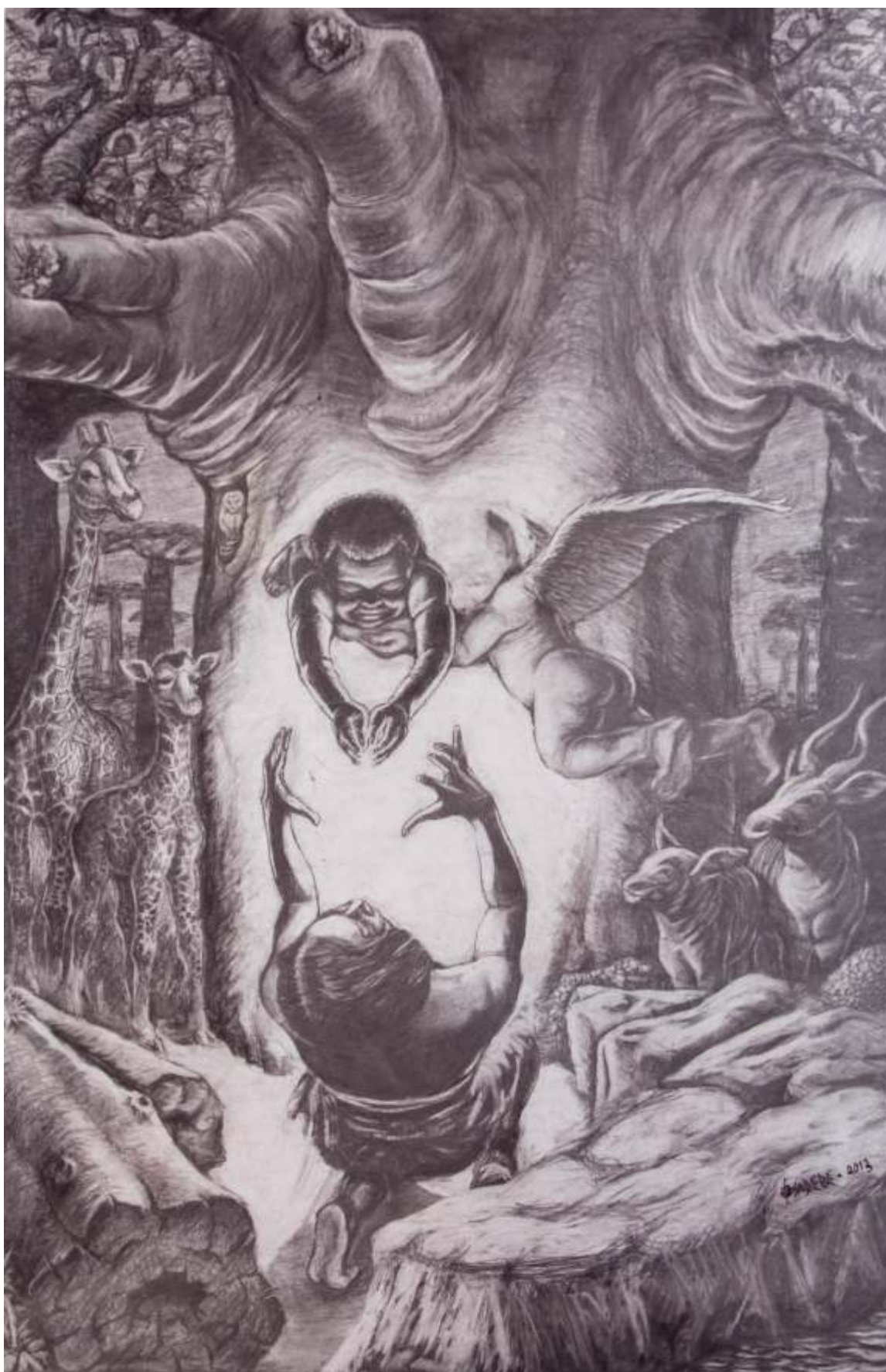
Tree of Life, pencil on paper, 2013, 66 x 40.5cm



Tree of Life, pencil on paper, 2013, 66 x 40.5cm







Tree of Life, pencil on paper, 2013, 66 x 40.5cm

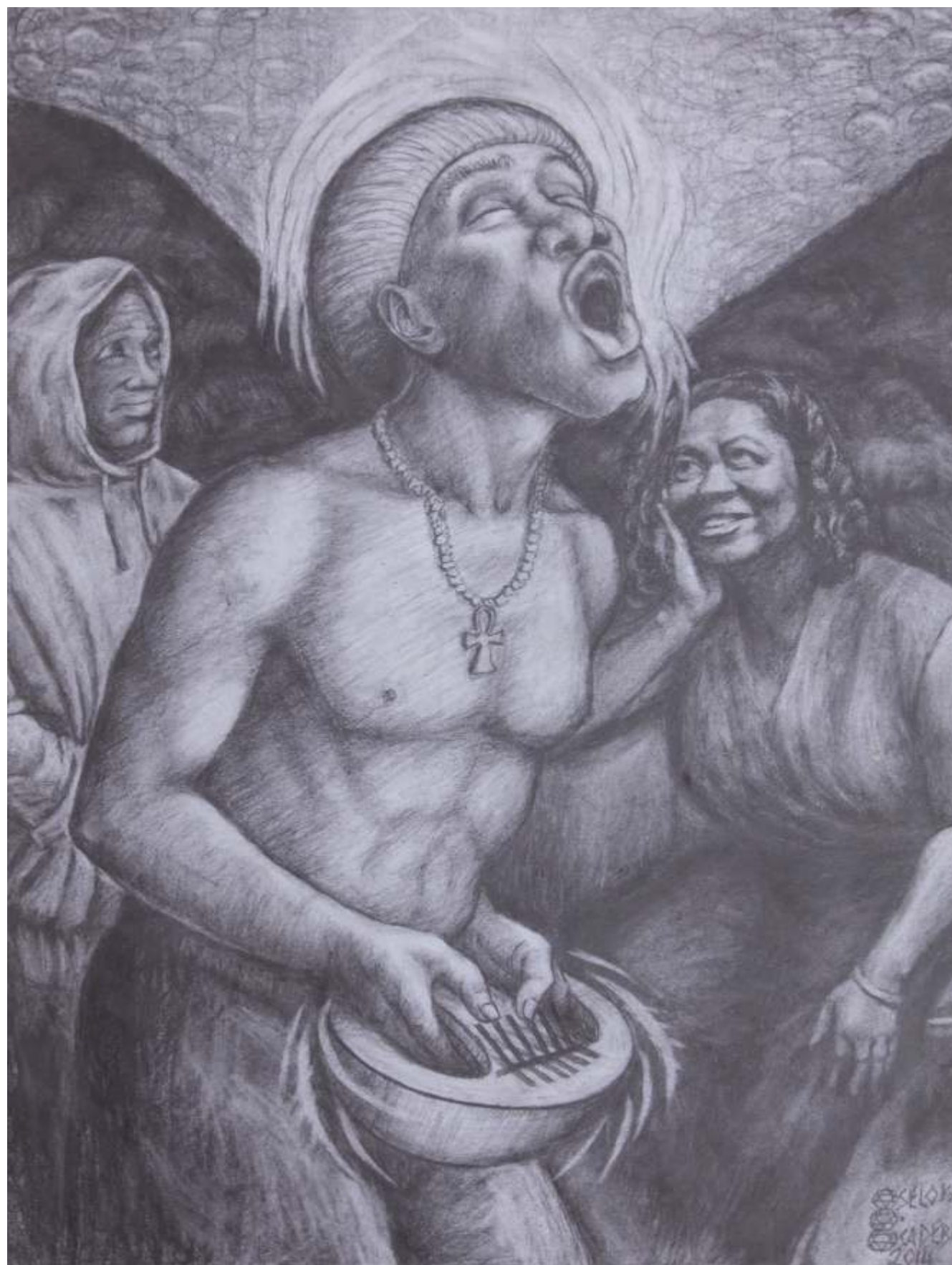




Ikemefuna

*This was inspired by two black singers, Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder. Ray Charles in his book says he didn't consider his blindness a setback, and Stevie Wonder shares the same mentality. Both men have overcome a setback that often hinders people from achieving fullness of life. Every human being goes through the same thing, except that there are so many people who do not see the positive in whatever they have. God has created all of those. We go through life and the fact that somebody has any kind of physical impairment...if they come to understand and recognize that there is something positive in that thing, they can overcome. Ray Charles was not born blind. He had sight. But God created us and through understanding things that may look like a hindrance or set back in our lives we come to understand that we can overcome. And the reverse is that if you see that as a problem, it takes away from the kinds of achievement that one would make. So I am using Ikemefuna as almost a verbatim statement of what Ray Charles and Steve Wonder said. I see that as a big lesson for all of us.*

*Oseloka Osadebe*



Ikemefuna, charcoal and conte crayon, 2014, 102 x 68cm





# In Conversation





## In Conversation

### Prof. Oseloka Osadebe with Sandra Mbanefo Obiago

Jackson, Mississippi

**Sandra Mbanefo Obiago: Tell me how you got to study art.**

**Oseloka Osadebe:** I was born in 1934 in Onitsha, into a large family of four sets of twins, myself being one of these twins, with a twin sister. When I came out of my mother's womb, I came out with chisels, hammers, and saws, and with these tools I began to create art. I believe my artistry is something God had already schooled me in; it then became a matter of how to apply these tools.

**SMO: Did you begin your art with sculpting?**

**OO:** I am what I call "taught by God", and as such it only took me noticing an object to get me thinking either about how to build or destroy it. I remember the first time I was in close contact with an aeroplane. I began to think of how to build one, despite my lack of knowledge about engines. I eventually learnt that car tyres have inner tubes, which are cut in strips and used as the elastic for catapults; this made me recognise that I could use the same object as a spring. At my core, I am a builder, and each time I see objects, I want to take them apart to rebuild.

**SMO: With this fascination with how things are made, and a desire to build things, where did you study?**

**OO:** In elementary school not all teachers were trained, but they were expected to tutor you in each subject. For me, art class was fantastic, as it brought with it some excitement and an element of surprise, as well as experimentation. Among the things I created in our art classes then were baskets made of raffia produced from palm trees that grew on the marshes. When the leaves were green, we peeled off the shiny surfaces and dyed them, before creating baskets out of them. My best part of school was art or craft class, or anything having to do with arts and craft.

**SMO: Due to the nature of your father's job as a pastor, you travelled quite a bit around Eastern Nigeria. Describe your secondary school years.**

**OO:** As part of my father's job, each year we were moved to a different town, like the families of military men. We travelled extremely often till I completed standard six. I attended a school nine miles outside of Onitsha called Merchants of Light. It was founded by a missionary who came to Nigeria on a mission trip as a principal to one of the best grammar schools in the area. He served as a principal for quite some time, all the while saving money to build his own school. The name of the school, Merchants of Light, was inspired by the boat with which he had come to Nigeria, as well as his desire to market education as a means to make people smarter.

Demas (Nwoko) and I went to secondary school together. I was a prefect at the time and when he came everyone said he was as good in drawing as I was. So we met and became friends right away. We are still friends today.

At 19, I moved to Lagos. In line with my artistic gift, I was quite skilled in draughting and got shortlisted at my job at *The Post and Telegraph* for a scholarship in England to pursue a career in draughting and engineering. Unfortunately, as a person from the East in the then Western Region, there was a slight issue of tribal profiling going on in my department, which led to a hesitation in my name being submitted for the scholarship.

In order to enjoy scholarships for overseas study, I had to work for the Eastern Region government. I was then given a condition by the regional scholarship board that, in order to attain the scholarship, I had to spend a year earning the right to the scholarship, which led to my application and acceptance to attend Ahmadu Bello University (ABU).



When I got admission to Ahmadu Bello, I travelled by train, but I encountered a ghastly accident at Lokoja when the train hit another train head-on and killed so many young people. For a year, my name was listed among those who were killed. Due to the accident, I had to return to the East, and many people did not know I had survived. But I had.

Demas Nwoko and I had been admitted the same year, but I did not make it because of the accident. This resulted in my being a year behind the other members of the Zaria Art Society, such as Demas Nwoko, Yussuf Grillo, and Uche Okeke. I would have been their classmate had I not gotten into the accident.

Because I was so religious and read the Bible, my father thought that God brought me to replace him when he retired as a church minister. He used to punish me when I came first in art class because he concluded that I spent all my time doing art and leaving out my religious learning which was important to him. Eventually, he realised that all the things he was trying to do to sidetrack me from art were not working, and he said, “Maybe God wants you to do art.”. So, not only did he let me go, he also began to pray for me. Unfortunately, he did not live to see me graduate.

**SMO: So tell me about Zaria.**

**OO:** I arrived in 1958 and left in 1962. Zaria was good. I used to have stomach problems, so I only ate rice pudding and milk. And I had a straw hat which I always wore sideways. I almost became a tennis star in Zaria. Back then, Uche was a bit aloof but, eventually, he and Demas Nwoko and I became very close. There are a number of photos with us three.

**SMO: Historians look at the Society as being the bedrock of the contemporary art movement in Nigeria. What made you become a member and what was different about the group’s outlook? Why were you called rebels?**

**OO:** We had professors who knew it would be helpful for us to form a society. There were students who were very good and clever and

Uche Okeke was quite ahead of us. He had, like, a sixth sense, and he worked very hard and also formed a small group of his own. We all looked up to him because he did not make mistakes and worked very hard. Those students like Uche who were a year or two ahead of us—they had the courage to challenge the professors. There was a head of department who had an exhibition at an advanced age. Uche and Demas took him to task. His paintings were very good, but the fact was that he was more than twice the age of the oldest students and he considered himself a “young artist”. We said he had no right to do that. Consider the fact that students had the level of education to challenge the professors, including the head of department. Eventually he found out what we were saying about him. But there was also a great deal of reaction that had some political impact.

The concept of Negritude was growing. Even though we in the arts did not quite comprehend the entire philosophical side of it, we knew that there was something going on at that time in some African countries like Senegal. Leopold Senghor was very powerful and in some ways he was considered *the* African philosopher. I wasn’t deeply into the political area and I couldn’t quite imbibe strong political views.

**SMO: So you eventually graduated from Ahmadu Bello University and got a job teaching art at Nsukka before you got a fellowship to study art in Chicago. What was that experience like?**

**OO:** I was now standing on my own. It was 1965. I was very young and those tools that I brought from my mother’s womb were beginning to work. I thought sculpture was *it* for me and I did bronze casting. The idea of the lost wax process was intriguing to me—that you could melt the wax and the metal would finally turn into bronze and go into the recesses.

The Art Institute of Chicago became very good for me. My master’s degree took two years, and when I graduated, I made a design that I called *Iba*, which comes from the traditional house. I took my professor to my home in Onitsha, behind St Stephen Church, and he ended up getting his PhD in African Art.



**SMO: Why did you pick the Iba concept?**

**OO:** Because the original house was a religious enclave where only the man went when he did some ceremonies and fasting. The design was so good. It's rectangular and there are vents that protect it. The concept was beautiful. My master's thesis was one of two works selected for exhibition at the Art Institute and I wore a complete white outfit like Ozo title-holders. My picture came out in the biggest newspaper in Chicago. What more could I ask for?

**SMO: So your master's degree looked at the interpretation of religious motifs in traditional architecture?**

**OO:** Yes. And the thing we called Uli became popular. Uche Okeke's mother was a great storyteller and he learnt a lot from her. He wrote two books on African folktales that I got a lot of inspiration from.

**SMO: You eventually developed a deeper interest in theatre. How did that transformation happen—from visual art to theatre?**

**OO:** It was inevitable because I needed to get funding. Once I got my master's, they said they were not going to pay for my doctorate in art, but they would pay for a master's in theatre. They knew I was interested in it because I had done some sets while I was in Nsukka, and so Northwestern University opened their arms and received me. But, before that, I went to the Goodman School of Drama, where I did another master's degree. Then, when I finished, the Nigerian Civil War was over but it was not yet safe to go home, so my brothers and sisters said, "Don't come back, or

they will draft you into the army", which was an easy way to get killed.

Those are some of my reasons for continuing in theatre, especially when I went to do my doctorate; I spent thirty years in theatre. A friend of mine, an artist and sculptor—he was in the Art Institute and he always said, "Come home. Come home. Remember you have tools".

**SMO: Why did you not go home? After the war there was reconstruction, but you stayed away for over 50 years.**

**OO:** I don't know. I was conquering a new territory. My theatre focus was in scene design which was the closest thing to visual art, so that was an attraction. And rightly, I used those skills that I brought into visual art. It was so interesting to use visual art to create set design.

**SMO:** Reflecting on your long and rich career, what were the highlights in terms of art and theatre? What are you particularly proud of?

**OO:** I am very proud of the fact that I brought great plays to the schools I worked in. After spending quite a few years in theatre, my concern became creating a legacy.

**SMO: So what is the legacy you want to leave behind?**

**OO:** I consider everything that I have done, including my exhibition this November, my legacy—my concept of reincarnation, as well as other religious and mystical concepts, that have led to works that I have done. I believe I made some important choices which led to *Ikemefuna*. I have a large work I am currently doing called *The Eternal Comings and Goings*, which still focuses on reincarnation, a topic that is very deep and important to me.

**SMO: What does the Inner Light series mean to you?**

**OO:** The *Inner Light* series is about the inner man—if you are familiar with the concept of reincarnation. Even though God created humans, we still have to learn to perfect ourselves. There is a personality inside each of us, the soul, which is





pure, and we humans don't have the power to dictate to the soul. The soul is the real master. But there is a personality, a kind of purifying of this inner man. The soul helps purify us each time we reincarnate; there is a new growing process that gets purified. The soul is God within us trying to help us perfect our outer selves. Jesus Christ is pure enough that he is not going to reincarnate anymore. Every human being has the potential for that, but not everybody will reach the point where they are going to be absorbed into the Godhead. The inner man and the inner light. *The Eternal Comings and Goings* is a step up from *Inner Light*.

My latest one is the *Ugo Oma Negute Ozi Oma*, which is essentially about Agbogidi as the King, as well as the symbolism of Ugo (jewel). Therefore it says, *Ugo Oma* that brings *Ozi Oma*—a good idea about life.

**SMO: We have a number of major threads running through your works—*Inner Light*, *Ikemefuna*, *Tree of Life*—but let's talk about your *Piggly Wiggly* series: what are they about?**

**OO:** Well, on the surface there is a caricature of the pig's face which is used, but it is also a mask for every member of the family. They all have a long snout. So there is a full family just as Picasso had a family of hybrids. You have a son, a daughter, a grandfather, and a grandmother. I came across this idea and it was so good. It was as if something was moving my hand. I have never done anything in all my artistic life which was so quick and so good and all about the same size.

**SMO: Tell me about *Ikemefuna*.**

**OO:** *Ikemefuna* was inspired by two black singers, Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder. In his book, Ray Charles says he didn't consider his blindness a setback, and Stevie Wonder shares the same sentiments. Both men overcame a setback that often hinders people from achieving fullness in life. Every human being goes through the same thing, except that there are so many people who do not see the positive in whatever they are experiencing. God has created all of those. We go through life and the

fact that somebody has any kind of physical impairment—if they come to understand and recognise that there is something positive in that, then they can overcome it. Ray Charles was not born blind. He had sight. But God created us, and through understanding something that may look like a hindrance or a setback in our lives, we come to understand that we can overcome. And the reverse is that if you see that as a problem, it takes away from the kinds of achievement that one could make. So I am using *Ikemefuna* as almost a verbatim statement of what Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder said. I see that as a big lesson for all of us.

**SMO: Tell me about the *Tree of Life* series?**

**OO:** There is a big theme that connects my family. When I was young, my parents told me and my sisters that whenever my older siblings played outside, they were not alone. Somehow, they would see a young person who did not have wings playing around them. They didn't talk to my sisters and brothers, but they kind of mingled in their group. When we got older, as teens, we asked our parents what happened. Why did we not see those angelic beings mingling with our sisters and brothers? The understanding was that they were heavenly bodies, and they were mingling and protecting them. So my sister, Dora, asked, "Why can't we see them now?" And my parents told us that now that there were more people in the house, both young and old, there was no need to have the angelic bodies come out and protect them.

So the way I used this in my artwork is that, Jesus Christ was a baby watching over his mother Mary. He brought a pink gem almost as big as a coconut, and he said to her, "This is the symbol of your goodness and purity. Someday you will recognise the importance of what you are and you will appreciate this." In the Bible it was said that Jesus and Joseph were still troubled by the fact that the public was concerned that there was no sexual connection and Joseph was continually worrying about what the public thought, but the point is that Jesus said to his mother that she is as good as anything and he didn't care what anyone said. Jesus gave the gem to the mother. And there is a song that I tried to write where he says to the mother, "Someday you will come to



appreciate how good you are. You are as good or better than this gem.” So I combined the two stories.

**SMO: Do you listen to music when you are doing your creative work?**

**OO:** Oh, yes. When I was at Merchants of Light, I thought I was going to be a pianist. I played the harmonica and all of those instruments. But one thing or another prevented me from pursuing music. One of them was that my piano teacher was also a student, so when he left, I lost my chance. I am not sure if I might have grown to become a great pianist.

**SMO: What type of music do you like? What is on your preferred playlist?**

**OO:** There was a time I was interested in classical music and I had fifty to sixty long-playing albums. I had Mozart and Beethoven and many others. I like Handel's *Water Music*. There are a lot of African musicians that I also particularly like.

*(Interview continues in the car with Professor Osadebe driving.)*

**SMO: So what do you think about America under Trump?**

**OO:** I don't understand Trump. I am not sure there are lots of people who understand him. And he does not really care whether people like him or not.

**SMO: Do you think we have made progress? Especially considering racism in America?**

**OO:** Since he was elected? I don't think so.

**SMO: So what's life like in the southern part of the United States?**

**OO:** I don't think it is different from what it used to be, but there are quite a few people who are moving up north. So maybe they want to consider moving up north for progress.

**SMO: Well, you're doing great. You have a very independent life here.**

**OO:** *(laughs)* I would have been dead if I couldn't help myself. I thank God. The good Lord is looking after me.

**SMO: Do you also cook for yourself?**

**OO:** Oh, yes. I do some serious cooking. There is a breakfast meal that I make with sunflower seeds and I have spinach in everything I cook. If you come to my fridge, spinach is the biggest thing in my fridge. I eat it in everything I cook. I am even thinking about learning to put it in ice-cream *(laughs)*. God has blessed me greatly and now I realise that I am not grateful enough considering what my mates are going through. God has blessed me with patience and told me that good things in life come when you deserve them.

**SMO: What's your prayer for this exhibition?**

**OO:** My prayer is for success. Also, that many young people and aspiring artists would get good inspiration and continue to create. I can't complain when I see and hear about other people having problems. I am eighty-four—almost eighty-five—years old. Having the show is a wonderful thing; it's like a fantastic Christmas celebration. When I was born, God put in both my hands tools and paintbrushes. There is so much creativity that God has given me and I cannot exhaust the creative force that God has given to me and which continues to manifest itself.

*(Interview conducted in 2017 and 2018 during studio visits and phone calls.)*









# Curriculum Vitae





- 1981 **Ph.D.**, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.  
Western and African theatre and Drama.  
Dissertation: **The Evolution of the Igbo Masker as a Dramatic Character.**
- 1973 **M.F.A.**, Goodman School of Drama. Chicago, Illinois.  
Scene Design, Lighting and Directing.  
Thesis: **Perspective on Italian Renaissance Stage**
- 1967 **M.F.A.**, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.  
Painting and Sculpture.  
Thesis: **Iba** (Igbo title) or **“Being”**, a studio project
- 1962 **B.A.**, College of Arts, Science & Technology (now Ahmadu Bello University), Zaria, Nigeria.  
Painting and Sculpture.  
Thesis: **Igbo Art.**
- AWARDS**
- 2002 **Nominated for the Howard Foundation Fellowship for Theatre (Playwriting).** (The Fellowship is administered by Brown University, Providence, RI 02912. Three contestants were chosen; I came fourth among ten finalists).
- 1995 **Teaching Through Film Workshop, N.Y.U.** Faculty Resource Network Summer Program for Curriculum Enrichment
- 1994 (Nov.) **Educator’s African Safari: A Three-Week Tour of the Kenyan Game Reserves & the Masai Communities.**  
Sponsor: Horizons Safari Specialists1994  
(Jul-Aug.)**Melon Foundation: Archival Research Summer Program**  
Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, MS 39174
- 1994 (Summer) **Scholar-In-Residence, N.Y.U.**, Faculty Resource Network  
Project Title: Rethinking Performance.
- 1992-93 **Fulton County Arts Council Grant** for the staging of *Persona* an expressionistic drama (work in progress).
- 1986-87 **Merrill Faculty Travel/Study Fellowship for Collecting Data in Nigeria for Playwriting**
- 1985 **Fulton County Arts Council & City of Atlanta Bureau of Cultural Affairs Grants** for Summer Theatre program Workshops & the Production of Joe DeGraft’s **Ananse and the Glue Man** (children’s theatre)
- 1965-67 **Aggrey Fellowship for African Students**, at The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois for an **M.F.A.** degree Study in visual arts. The art study was preceded by a tour of European an art galleries and museums in **Germany, France, Holland and England.**

**Work Experiences**

1998	<p><b>Associate Professor of Theatre,</b> Department of Speech Communication &amp; Theatre, Jackson State University, Jackson</p> <p><b>Subjects Taught:</b> Introduction to Theatre, Fundamentals of Acting, Introduction to Technical Theatre &amp; Laboratory, Advanced Acting, Fundamentals of Playwriting, Introduction to Scenic Design, Techniques of Directing, Stage Lighting Design, And Production Laboratory.</p> <p><b>Play Directing Experiences at Jackson State:</b></p>
2004	<p><b>Master Pierre Patelin</b> – Anonymous</p>
2002	<p><b>The Dance on the widow’s Row</b> – Sam Art Williams</p>
2001	<p><b>Two Trains Running</b> – August Wilson</p> <p><b>Set Design Experience at Jackson State:</b></p>
2007	<p><b>The Magic Flute</b> – Wolfgang Mozart</p>
2007	<p><b>One Monkey Don’t Stop No Show</b> – Don Evans</p>
2004	<p><b>The Master Pierre Patelin</b> – Anonymous</p>
2004	<p><b>A Lesson Before Dying</b> – Romulus Linney</p>
2003	<p><b>Alabama Sky</b> – Pearl Cleage</p>
2002	<p><b>Two Trains Running</b> – August Wilson</p>
2001	<p><b>Happy Ending</b> – Douglas T. Ward</p>
2000	<p><b>Flyin’ West</b> – Pearl Cleage</p>
2000	<p><b>The Claw</b></p>
1999	<p><b>Livin’ Fat</b> – Judi Ann Masom</p>
1999	<p><b>Ceremonies in Dark Old Men</b> – Lonnie Elder III</p>
1993-98	<p><b>Associate Professor &amp; Director of Theatre,</b> Department of English, Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, MS</p> <p><b>Subjects Taught at Tougaloo:</b></p> <p>Stagecraft, Production Laboratory, Playwriting &amp; Effective Speaking</p>



	<b>Play Directing Experiences at Tougaloo:</b>
1997	<b>The Colored Museum</b> – George C. Wolfe
1997	<b>Soul Gone Home</b> – Langston Hughes
	<b>Mother and Child</b> – Langston Hughes
	<b>Simply Heavenly</b> (scene 3) – Langston Hughes
1996	<b>Peter Rock</b> – Oseloka Osadebe
1996	<b>Day of Absence &amp; Happy Ending</b> – Douglas T. Ward
1995	<b>Purlie</b> – Ossie Davis
1995	Scenes from <b>A Raisin in the Sun</b> – Lorraine Hansberry
1994	<b>The Colored Museum</b> – George C. Wolfe
1994	Scenes from <b>Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom</b> – August Wilson
1993	<b>Persona</b> (short one act) – Oseloka Osadebe
1993	Scenes from <b>Fences</b> – August Wilson
	<b>Scene Design Experiences at Tougaloo:</b>
1997	<b>The Colored Museum</b> – G.C.W.
1997	<b>Soul Gone Home, Mother &amp; Child, &amp; Simply Heavenly</b>
1996	<b>Peter Rock</b> – Oseloka Osadebe
1996	<b>Day of Absence &amp; Happy Ending</b> – Douglas T. Ward
1995	<b>Purlie</b> – Ossie Davis
1995	<b>Scenes from A Raisin in the Sun</b> – Lorraine Hansberry
1994	<b>The Colored Museum</b> – G.C.W.
1994	Scenes from <b>Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom</b> – August Wilson
1993	<b>Persona</b> – Oseloka Osadebe
1993	Scenes from <b>Fences</b> – August Wilson
1992-93	<b>Adjunct Professor of Theatre</b> , Saint Leo College, Fort McPherson, Fort McPherson, GA

	<b>Subjects Taught:</b> Introduction to Theatre and Theatre History
1983-93	<b>Associate Professor of Theatre,</b> Theatre Department, Spelman College, Atlanta, GA.
	<b>Subjects Taught at Spelman:</b>
	Introduction to Theatre, Play Analysis, Playwriting, Survey of World Drama, Directing, Acting, Scene Design, Theatre Management, Seminar in Theatre Studies and Stagecraft.
	<b>Play Directing Experiences at Spelman:</b>
1990	<b>The Lion and the Jewel</b> – Wole Soyinka
1989	<b>Wine in the Wilderness</b> – Alice Childress
1987	<b>Guys and Dolls</b> – Frank Loesser & Abe Burrows
1986	<b>Antigone</b> – Jean Anouilh
1986	<b>Ananse and the Glue Man</b> – Joe DeGraft
1986	<b>Simply Heavenly</b> – Langton Hughes
1985	<b>A Raisin in the Sun</b> – Lorraine Hansberry
1985	<b>Candida</b> – George Bernard Shaw
1984	<b>The Lion and the Jewel</b> – Wole Soyinka
	<b>Scene Design Experiences at Spelman:</b>
1985	<b>Candida</b> – George Bernard Shaw
1984	<b>The Lion and the Jewel</b> – Wole Soyinka
1981-83	<b>Associate Professor of Theatre,</b> English Department, Central Stae Univeristy, Wilberforce, OH
	<b>Subjects Taught at Central State:</b>
	Stagecraft, Script Analysis & Theatre Management
	<b>Play Directing Experiences at Central State:</b>
1983	<b>Trombones,</b> a musical adaptation of James Weldon Johnson’s <b>God’s Trombones</b>
1982	<b>Day of Absence &amp; Happy Ending</b> – Douglas T. Ward
1982	<b>A Raisin in the Sun</b> – Lorraine Hansberry

1981	<b>The River Niger</b> – Joseph A. Walker
	<b>Scenic Design Experiences at Central State:</b>
1983	<b>Trombones</b> – Oseloka Osadebe & James Weldon Johnson
1982	<b>Day of Absence &amp; Happy Ending</b> – Douglas T. Ward
1982	<b>A Raisin in the Sun</b> – Lorraine Hansberry
1981	<b>The River Niger</b> – Joseph A. Walker
1982	<b>Set Design for Cactus Flower</b> , presented by the Xenia Area Living Arts Council, Xenia, Ohio.
1969-72	<b>Assistant Professor of Art</b> , Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, Illinois.1
962-65	<b>Assistant Lecturer</b> , Art Department, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Anambra, Nigeria.
	<b>COMMUNITY SERVICES</b>
1992	Member of the Cultural Olympiad Advisory Council, Theatre Subcommittee, Atlanta, GA.
1990-92	<b>Member of the Theatre Panels for Evaluating Grant Proposals submitted to the Fulton County Arts Council</b> , Atlanta, GA.
	<b>PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS</b>
	Southeastern theatre Conference Association for Theatre in Higher Education Mississippi Alliance for Arts Education
	<b>THEATRE WORKSHOPS</b>
1996	<b>Peter Rock – War-of-the-Sexes, A Dramatized Reading and Review.</b> National Conference of Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), August 7-10.
1996	<b>Performing Artists' Workshop</b> , Mississippi Arts Commission, Jackson, MS., June 6-8.
1995	<b>Peter Rock – War-of-the-Sexes, A Dramatized Reading and Review.</b> Annual Third-World Studies Conference, University of Nebraska at Omaha, October 12-14.
1995	<b>Teaching Through Films, N.Y.U.</b> Faculty Resource Network Summer Program, June 3-18.



PLAYS

- 1994

**Johnny Goes Berserk**, a short one-act in realism. It is a spin-off from the experiences of nine Tougaloo College students (better known as “The Tougaloo Nine”) who were involved in the 1960’s civil rights library sit-ins.
- 1996

**Peter Rock**, a satirical revue based on gender conflicts between the women and men of Onitsha (Nigeria). It is a pilot of sorts, for **Peter** (see below).

WORK-IN-PROGRESS

**Peter**, a musical satire in three acts based on earth-shaking chain of incidents in the life of an Onitsha woman, KAMBILI, *a tomboy-of-tomboys*, whose nonconformist behaviors rattle the foundation of the “age-old” male control of her community.







# Acknowledgments & Credits



I trust this exhibition will be an important contribution in documenting the lives and work of inspirational artists from Nigeria. I also hope that the exhibition will shed light on the importance of the Zaria Art Society's role and contribution in the development of contemporary art in Nigeria and beyond. I would like to sincerely thank Oseloka Osadebe for entrusting me with his precious artwork and believing in me to present his life's work and share his story truthfully. Sincere thanks to HRH Igwe Alfred Nnaemeka Achebe, the Obi of Onitsha (Agbogidi) for having entrusted me with the task of bringing Prof. Oseloka Osadebe's contribution to light, and his encouragement and positive fatherly advice during the journey of this exhibition. A debt of gratitude goes to Sam Maduegbuna who helped with the painstaking research and preparation of works, and for being a committed son to the old master, making countless trips to Jackson allay fears and calm nerves. My sincere thanks and respect goes to Professor Chika Okeke-Agulu for constantly raising the bar and giving me strict curatorial guidelines which stretched me way beyond my comfort zone, and for your encouragement to present this exhibition at the National Museum, ensuring it gets broad access for local and international visitors. Thank you for your excellent critical essay which provides a vital scholarly framework for Inner Light. Deep gratitude to Oliver Enwonwu, for being real and for understanding the stresses of curating, and for writing a great critical essay at short notice. Sincere thanks to Onyema Offoedu-Okeke for allowing us to use an excerpt from his great book, *Artists of Nigeria*, which so perfectly gives a brief history of the Zaria Art Society. Thanks to Kelechi Njoku of Kachifo for copyediting the book. I am greatly indebted to my team, Nneoma

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