

# NEO CUSTODIANS







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Nwakuso Edozien  
Johnson Eziefula  
Ify Chiejina

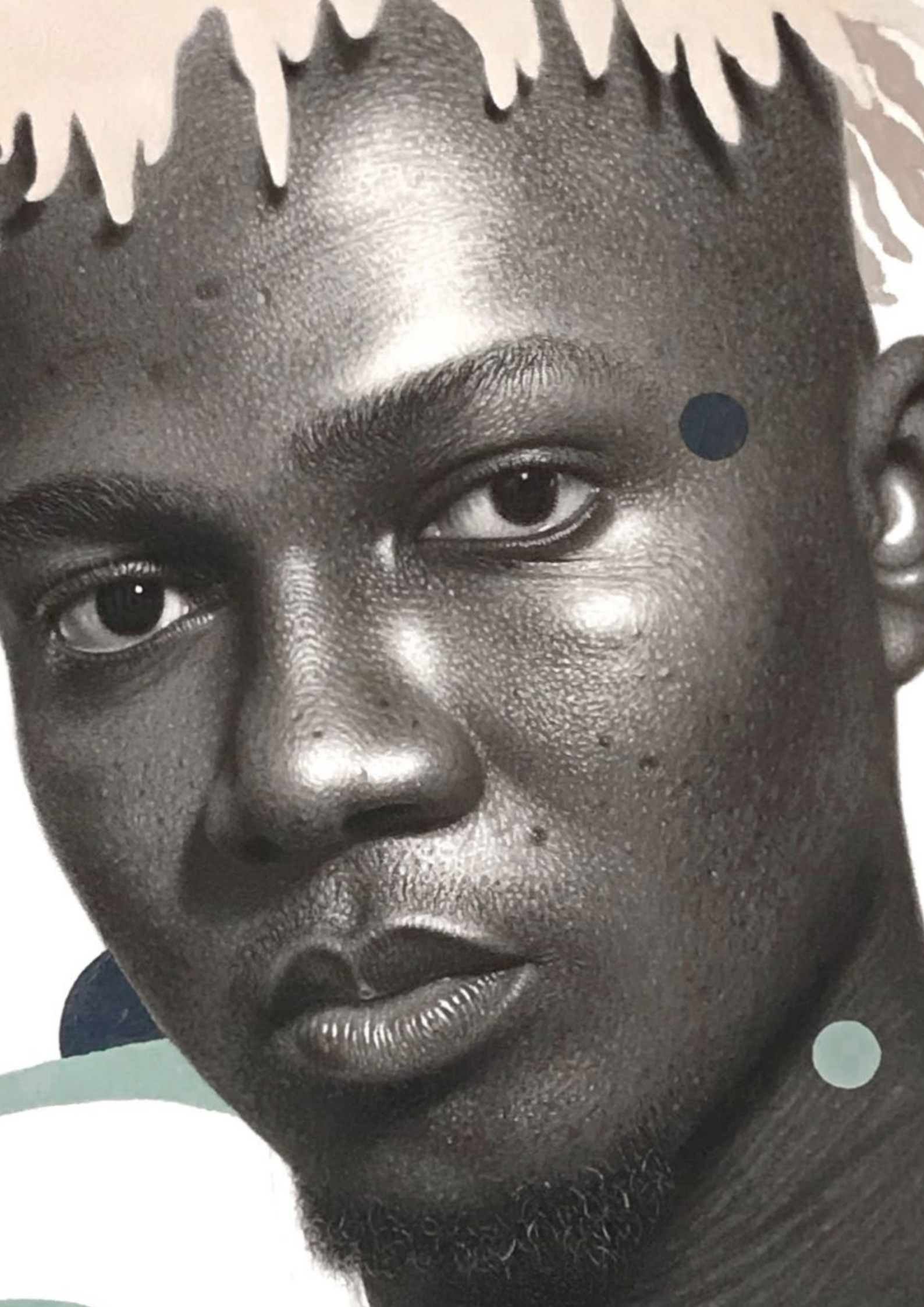




Curated by  
Nneoma Ilogu







# Preface

Today more than ever, there is need for inspiration and for light. Today more than ever, we need to re-examine our values, and ask ourselves fundamental questions about who we are, what are the influences that shaped us, and what difference our unique perspective, voice, path, journey and vision can make in the universal scheme of things.

Today, more than ever, with increasing information at our fingertips, we need to take time to dig deeper and decipher the signs of the times. We need to learn from the critical and shattering impact of the COVID pandemic on our world, and decide what fundamental changes we need to make to heal on every level.

Art is so powerful. I believe artists feel and think on a deeper spiritual level. Art reflects what is in plain view in ways which helps us see with a different eye, whether it is about our political, communal, familial or personal realities.

SMO has always believed that young people have the power to make us stop and reflect; their views can resonate so deeply that we change our behavior. Through their exploration and experimentation, they have the ability to awaken and speak to the spirit-child within each of us. Over the years, SMO has always made space for emerging talent to be celebrated on our various platforms.

Neo-custodians is an exhibition which presents fresh curatorial and artistic talent who ask us to take a closer look at how our primary and secondary cultures, environment, education, experience and technological habits mold and form our identity and our belief systems.

I hope you draw strength and inspiration from the powerful works of Ifeatuanya "Ify" Chiejina, Nwakuso Edozien, and Johnson Eziefula, the curation of Nneoma Ilogu and the reflections of our talented writers, Charlotte Langhorst and Anna Kovie Parker, along with the research, design and videography of Majid Biggar and Alexandra Maduagwu. Together they are all part of an exciting new culturally-hybrid neo-custodianship which is charting a new path into a richer future.

Sandra Mbanefo Obiagio  
SMO Founder & Executive Director







# Curatorial Foreword

*"If you don't know history, then you don't know anything.  
You are a leaf that doesn't know it is part of a tree."*

- Michael Crichton

Recently, I have found myself drawn further into exploring Nigerian culture and its impact on contemporary society, precipitated perhaps by the resurfacing of the book, 'Coping with Three Cultures', an autobiography written by my Grandfather. He spoke of challenges he faced as he journeyed across continents and experienced different cultures. Its final chapter was dedicated to his grandchildren advising that we stay true to our roots in spite of the geographical region we may find ourselves in. This was the stance of my grandfather's generation, and my parents who followed after him. However, in my generation, the perception of identity has shifted.

With globalization and the influx of technology, culture is no longer confined to a fixed geographical location, but is easily available and accessible to all who wish to dabble. In this moment, eyes all over the world are on Africa, wanting to glean from her wealth of culture, and infuse elements into global fashion, music, and visual arts. Though this is not a new trend, as we are reminded of the influence African masks and sculptures had on artists such as Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso in the early 1900s. It is also important to note the influence goes both ways, as in the case of fashion; since the 1800s we have seen the adoption of batik or wax-resistant cloth from Indonesia as the symbolized and celebrated 'African-print' in Central and West Africa. The borrowing from African cultures has increased dramatically as aided by technology and its presentation of the world at our fingertips. With these cultural influences and adaptations, it is important to interrogate the ways in which the younger generation defines their identity and responds to the place of prominence our culture has come to.

In Neo Custodians, three young artists, Ifeatuanya "Ify" Chiejina, Nwakuso Edozien, and Johnson Eziefula sift through layers of social, genetic, and cultural inheritance and influences in an attempt to define, examine, and celebrate self. Through varying media, from

paintings to graphic illustrations, hyper realistic drawings to collage, each artist invites the viewer to join in their questioning. Ify speaks about the duality experienced when attempting to internalize societal precepts, Nwakuso uses mixed media as a metaphor to address the various layers and complexities of genetic and geographical impact, and Johnson takes on a psychological approach with the use of light and color to emphasize the permeation of cross-cultural influences. These artists do not claim to have arrived at an answer, but with each brush stroke expose questions and ponderings buried beneath the surface.

Ify Chiejina, a first-generation Nigerian-American, considers the tensions of being raised African in a western society. Her works in this exhibition are part of an ongoing series of drawings, consisting mostly of self-portraits, each one representing different facets of her identity. Inspired by her mother who was a fashion designer, Ify plays around with patterns, recreating the renowned Ankara prints worn in each portrait. In 'Artist Brand vs. Persona – Giving Birth to New Ideas', a portrait of two identical figures addresses the dilemma of self-portrayal, torn by the acceptable way to depict oneself in various settings. However, even in this dilemma, there is a renewal/rebirth that takes place. In 'déjà vu' the artist touches on the complexities of morality and sensuality, resulting in the process of unlearning and self-acceptance.

Nwakuso Edozien, a Nigerian-German currently based in America takes on the concept of identity from a genetic approach, factoring in geographical/environmental influences. With an architectural background, she creates her portraits and illustrations with layers of influence with 3D textures signifying depth and interconnectedness. 'It Takes A Village', a line drawing of multiple layered faces all connected in what resembles an orb, highlights that the unique multiple facets and influences contributing to the holistic formation of self, also connects us to a larger community and heritage. This concept is also mirrored in 'The Narratives in Nigerian Textiles', an illustration in which she examines the communal dynamics involved in native textile production practices such as weaving and dyeing.



Johnson Eziefula, a graduating senior of the Department of Pharmacy at the University of Lagos adopts a more scientific approach in his analysis. In a series focused on what he has termed Cultural Hybridity, hyper realistic portraits emphasize the intersection of a myriad of influences brought about by colonization, globalization, and technological socialization on native communities and cultures. Creating effectively with the concept of light, Johnson celebrates the melanated vessels of his subjects, giving a glow-like effect to the skin of each subject. On one, the inscription ' & Proud' is boldly brandished on the chest, an outright declaration of pride in black skin. However, despite the daring pose of most of his subjects, a reservation can be noted in their eyes. Using colorful circles to embody the various cultural influences, some of these circles can be seen affixed on the subject's bodies, referencing the hybrid each individual becomes due to exposure to varying influences.

These three artists understand the burden of the Millennial who navigates the notion of self by interrogating all inheritance and all influence. But, as Ayishat Akanbi said, "Your fixation with your identity limits your identity", these artists, the Neo Custodians, therefore leave room for freedom of interpretation and questioning. Ify's works indicate that the journey to self often includes the process of interrogation, unlearning, renewal, and self-acceptance. Nwakuso while shedding light on the layered complexity of our self-composition, also acknowledges how these layers connect us across communities, and Johnson's work addresses the inevitable hybridity of self and cultural influence, urging that this newness of self with all the questions it brings, be celebrated.

Nneoma Ilogu  
Curator





Nwakuso **EDOZIEN**

*“As an artist, I explore through mixed media the layers and complexities within human identities. ”*

Nwakuso Edozien





Nwakuso Edozien (born 1996) is a multicultural artist who draws inspiration from various disciplines. She has a degree in Architecture from Cornell University and uses her art to represent the concept and creation of cultural identity. Owing to her architectural background, Nwakuso utilizes linework and 3D textures to enhance the depth and complexities of her work. Her art reflects her diverse upbringing and changing environments as she has lived and schooled in Nigeria, Germany, England, Wales, and the US and is of Nigerian and German heritage. Through painting, design, and sculpture, she creates multi-layered artworks which pay homage to her Nigerian roots. Her work, in turn, aids her along her journey of self discovery and belonging. During her time at United World College of the Atlantic, her work was presented to HRH, Queen Elizabeth II of England. Her works have also been exhibited at the Presidential Dinner for the Creative Industry, in Lagos in 2014.





With my multi-cultural upbringing, identity has been something of a complex journey and question for me. I have spent my life balancing my Nigerian and German heritage, while exploring the various cultures I have encountered through my education and travels. It has opened my eyes to the complexities and inter-connected identities of communities as well as the individuals that constitute them.

My use of mixed media, such as acrylic, watercolour, pencil, ink and more, allows me to explore the relationship and depth of layered textures, colours, and themes within a composition. They represent to me, my conceptual ideas of identity, the messy varied layers of time that despite their variations create a holistic image of a person.

The faces I draw are representations of identities, rather than purely based on existing people. They are traces of not just the common features of a face, such as the eyes, nose, lips, and ears, but fleeting and impermanent things such as emotions, shadows, and subtle movements of the face.

I hope that viewers, when looking at my art, see not just the entire image but the minute details and layers that create it. My art celebrates the abrupt changes and layers, because I believe that we are composed of different memories, narratives, colours, images and environments, some of which may contradict each other, but are all necessary in creating the people and identities we are at present.



This body of work focuses on the layers of the interdependent concepts of identity and community. The linework can stand on its own, yet through the layering of colours, textures and materials, the depth and complexity of the identity drawn is exposed and highlighted.

Each piece is an abstracted composition of the time and patience needed to create the layered narrative of an identity, individual or community. It is a conceptual display of the steppingstones and layers needed to become. A demonstration of how every person or community you encounter in your life has layers below the surface that show themselves to you in a unique way and are all needed in order to create the holistic identity of the person or community before you. This body of work is my visualisation of complex identities.





*"The faces I draw are representations of identities, rather than purely based on existing people. They are traces of not just the common features of a face, such as the eyes, nose, lips, and ears, but fleeting and impermanent things such as emotions, shadows, and subtle movements of the face. "*







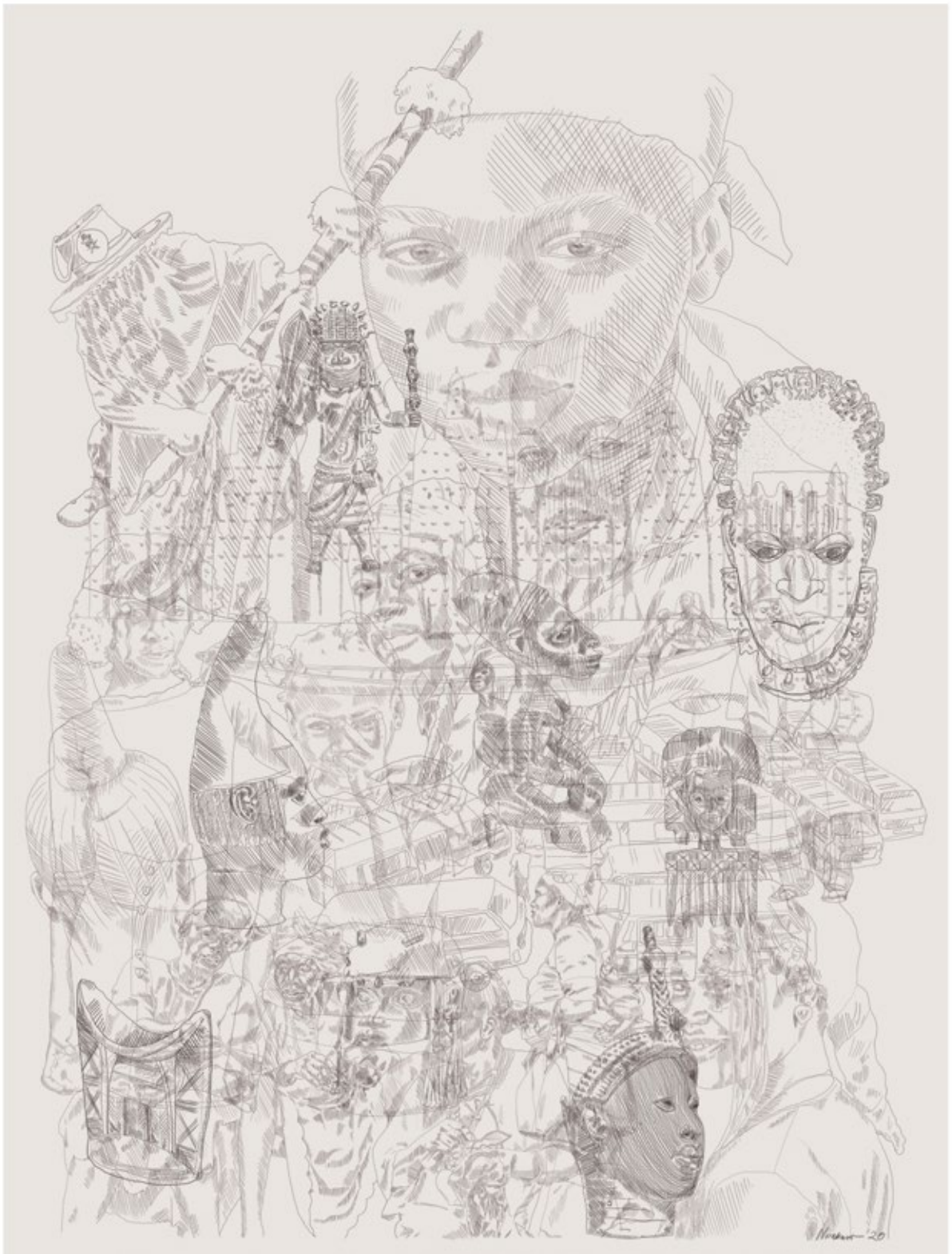
*“Each piece is an abstracted composition of the time and patience needed to create the layered narrative of an identity, individual or community. ”*

Nwakuso Edozien













*“Nwakuso while shedding light on the layered complexity of our self-composition, also acknowledges how these layers connect us across communities.”*

Nneoma Ilogu









# How to become a Neo-Custodian

On first sight it is an honor to be a custodian. But the wonderful gift and opportunity of safekeeping could without doubt escalate into becoming a threatening and overwhelming burden. Being or becoming a Custodian not only requires a broad knowledge but entails multiple responsibilities, which require a holistic and prudent perspective. The three young artists in this exhibition refreshingly are trying to free themselves from a static concept of custody and allow us to access their vivid and open thinking process by making their internal dialogues visible. Phenomena of heritage, identity and cultural orientation have been liberated and are treated with a playful and experimental approach. Dualities, layers of narrative and intended confusion are employed as rhetorical artifices. They serve as points of departure to invite the beholder to add or subtract in order to reflect our own mechanisms of being an agent of culture and ourselves. Nothing is defined by appearance and the artists rather deal with fugacity, inextricable dialectics and incompleteness. Once we start reflecting on our individual role as custodians and allow ourselves to identify new means of owner- and mediator-ship these works start to unfold.

Looking at Eziefula Johnson's sleek and hyper-realistic portraits of beautiful young people, we somehow feel disturbed by the contrast of systematically arranged dots and stylized accessories that form an antipode in contrast to the accurately depicted human figures. Smoothly and almost unnoticed we are suddenly in doubt and might even feel disturbed: shall we focus on the perfect depiction of skin, pores and expression or rather try to understand the simplicity of the added spots. Why did the artist include these disruptive elements?

Nwakuso Edozien equally experiments playfully with the effects of incompleteness and imperfection. Faces, figures and narratives have been layered by the artist and the singular elements become part of a greater ornament. Like a West African textile, the singular elements are interwoven and what seems so complex becomes crystal clear once we adjust the focus and accept complexity and heterogeneity (The Narratives of Nigerian Textiles). The fluid lines do



not seem to have a starting or ending point, they define an organic organism of individuals and cultural memories (It Takes a Village).

Ify Chiejina challenges the beholder with a visual feast of colorful vignettes made of disruptive dualities, patterns and stimulating color schemes. In her works nothing is set, stable or taken for granted. Eyes, masks, references of exotic animals and elements of traditional fabric create not only an enticing, yet unsettling atmosphere. With great truthfulness her works manifest the status quo of a whole generation that has to work off a long past with extensive and far-reaching implications. Macro and micro, external and internal factors, society and individuality, the past and the future have become unbreakable links while the inner desire to analyze particular issues as isolated entities is virulent. But instead of complaining or trying to solve a Sisyphean task, Chiejina lays all cards on the table: her choice of motifs, her unwieldy composition, and choice of color palettes depict in fine cadences unresolved societal and inner conflicts. Her works invite us to enter her chambers of think-tanks and to expand the process.

Chiejina, Edozien, and Johnson reveal a continuous sensibility that asks the spectator to recompose the continuity of a narrative of heritage and identity. A vivid incompleteness is the potential of a new era of custodians and substitutes a static fulfillment of a transforming role. Being a Neo Custodian evolves into something thrilling as we are invited to enter laboratories of discourses.

Charlotte Langhorst  
Art Historian







Johnson **EZIEFULA**

*"It's my attempt to bring forth consciousness of the change going on in the world today, the interconnection between several parts of the world, and how I see our reception to new cultures being an element to foster unification. "*

Johnson Eziefula



Eziefula Johnson Jnr (born 1998) is a self-taught mixed media artist practicing art under the movement known as Contemporealism; coined from Contemporary Art & Hyperrealism. He is currently a finalist studying Pharmacy at the University of Lagos. Johnson specializes in drawing and painting; exploring the medium of charcoal, acrylic, pastel and fabric on paper and canvas. His interest and love for art has been evident since he was a child, as he would draw and paint on any surface he found suitable. Overtime he evolved and began practicing art professionally and publicly in October, 2019. He focuses on Cultural Hybridity, Blackness, pop-culture, Identity, Personality and Human Psychology (although his scope of discussions are not limited to these subject matters) and aims to depict his observations, personal encounters, curiosities and his person, through the combination of colour, shapes, portraiture & symbolism.





This body of work highlights the effect of globalization, migration, technological advancements, media socialization as well as colonialism on individual pre-existing cultures and personalities, hence, placing cultural hybridization in view. My approach with regards to the depiction of these works are based on psychology. I quantified cultures and cultural influence as energy bubbles depicted as colored circles (the choice of colours are as a result of the psycho-emotional state I ought to capture my audience within, triggering stimulus and engaging the human physiology & psychology through light, colour combinations and shapes).

In each piece, there are three different colored circles, the number which symbolizes totality, is the first number to which 'all' is attached to, hence pointing out all possible/potential cultural influences on the average contemporary west-African individual that of yesterday, today and yet to come. A Circle symbolizes community, a free sense of movement, associated with kinetic energy so to say, hence artistically complementing the nature of culture in such a global world of today; where we are all connected, that motion associated with how easily social behavior and customs could be driven around and adopted.





I quantified cultures and cultural influence as energy bubbles depicted as colored circles (the choice of colours are as a result of the psycho-emotional state I ought to capture my audience within, triggering stimulus and engaging the human physiology & psychology through light, colour combinations and shapes).

Cultural hybridity as said is expressed ideologically but is being depicted physically as the circles are seen to interrupt and subsequently being attached to the skin surface of each human subject in these works, hence depicting an interruption of one's entirety, birthing a new creature; which is what I term a "cultural hybrid."

It's my attempt to bring forth consciousness of the change going on in the world today, the interconnection between several parts of the world, and how I see our reception to new cultures being an element to foster unification, a common factor, a convergence in such world of diversity, favoritism, bigotry, discrimination and conflict today.







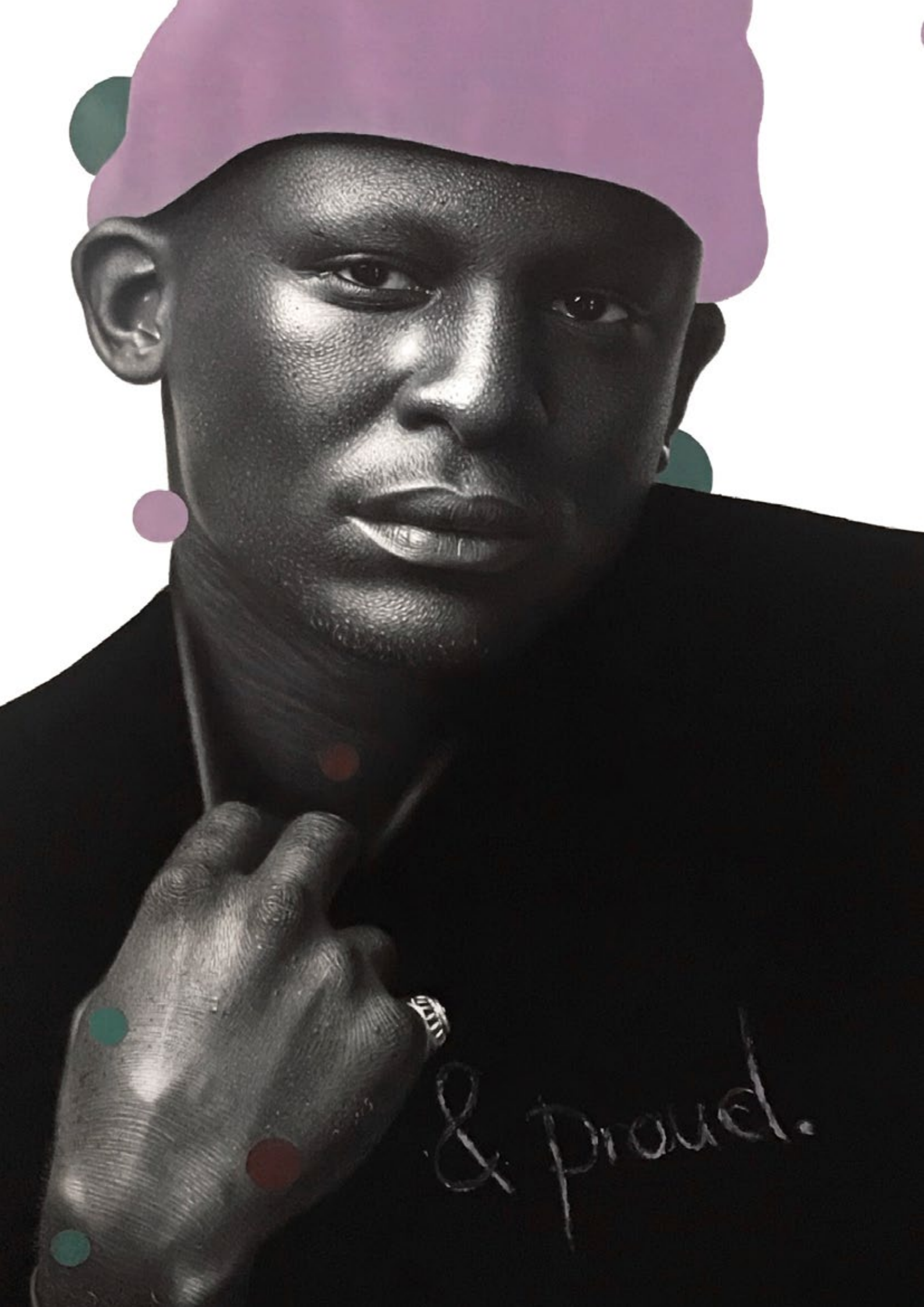


*“I quantified cultures and cultural influence as energy bubbles depicted as colored circles. ”*

Johnson Eziefula







& Proud.

*“ The artists reveal a continuous sensibility that asks the spectator to recompose the continuity of a narrative of heritage and identity.”*

Charlotte Langhorst







# Neo Custodians on Self-Actualisation and the Politics of Being

I have always been fascinated by the theory of being as a verb – of ‘be-ing’, of existence – as a state of presence and awareness of self, as distinct from the collective markers and identifiers of culture, race, religion, gender, etcetera. This concept, is by no means new, the philosophy of self - as the many conditions of identity that makes one subject of experience distinct from other experiences - has been a theme of centuries’ old discourses.

Our communal existence is one that appears to thrive on the unending cycle of what should be based primarily on societal and cultural expectations. As diverse as the human experience is, it is curious how averse we seem to be to ideas that differ from ours. The notion of “othering” is commonplace, emphasising the apartness in traits that differ significantly from what is considered custom. Thus, an internal conflict arises when the markers of sameness and identity become unclear; when the lines blur and one finds oneself not fitting squarely in these preconceived boxes. It is this unease that Nwakuso Edozien, Johnson Eziefula, and Ifeatuanya “Ify” Chiejina attempt to unpack in Neo Custodians.

The works in Edozien’s mixed media body of work, aptly titled Layered, bring to life the intricacies and multifaceted nature of human identities. By layering colours, textures, and materials, the artist seems to emphasise the journeying towards self-actualisation more than the recognition of self as a destination in and of itself. By being “inside” and fully experiencing the plethora of elements that often merge to create a holistic identity, Edozien draws on her multi-cultural upbringing using “messy, varied lines” to portray the interconnectedness of our lived experiences with each stroke upon masterful stroke.

In contrast to the busyness of Edozien’s lines, Eziefula’s hyper-realistic drawings in the series, Entirety Interrupted, appear almost muted, triggering what he describes as a psycho-emotional response from the viewer. Through the combination of portraiture in charcoal and pastel coloured circles, the works in the series examine the relation between cross-cultural contact and psychological aspects

associated with identity - one that is heavily influenced by the effects of globalisation. Eziefula's work recognises both the coherence of self and the fragmentation of cultural identifiers, both pre-existing and emerging.

A critical aspect of the self-actualisation is the process of lifelong learning, an ability influenced by many factors – biological, sociological, cultural, emotional, spiritual, moral developments – and a dynamic force that prompts the development of an individual's capability. Chiejina explores this process of learning and unlearning through her self-portrait figurative paintings, *Patterned*. In a society that tends to avoid change in order to avoid perceived fear, the artist uses her canvas as “a battlefield of her inner struggles and a process of unlearning”.

Through various media, these young artists question, probe and explore, pushing the boundaries of what it means to be – to exist beyond cultural precepts. Whether it be the complexities within human identities and the interconnected concepts of identity and community as expressed in Edozien's mixed media, the emergence of neo-identities and their convergence with pre-existing cultures as captured in Eziefula's hyper-realistic drawings, or the exploration of identity and self-esteem in Chiejina's self-portrait paintings, the works in this exhibition seek to encapsulate the breadth of fully-functioning human potential – one that is able to access all capacities of experience, connection and proactivity without necessarily internalising societal conditioning. It's refreshing, and, as the kids say these days, I'm here for it.

Anna Kovie Parker.  
Writer, Curator









Ify **CHIEJINA**

*“The canvas is a battlefield of her inner struggles with herself and a process of unlearning what she has learned. The intention is to be reborn as a new person while cultivating a strong sense of autonomy and pride.”*

Heng-Gil Han  
Artist Consultant





Ifeatuanya (Ify) Chiejina (B. 1988) is a visual artist born and raised in Queens, New York. Ify is a black Igbo female with ideas, thoughts, and truths that are rooted and reflective of different customs and traditions. As a Nigerian-American, Ify considers the tensions and complexities that come with being brought up in an African household, in a western society. Ify completed her B.A in philosophy from Queens College and completed a certificate program for the Caribbean Cultural Center of African Diaspora Institute's in 2015. She has participated in residencies at Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning both in New York. Her paintings are in the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection. Ify is also one of the founding members for the Southeast Queens Artist Alliance, (SEQAA).



Patterned – Artist Brand vs. Persona, Giving Birth to New Ideas  
Colored pencils, pen, and pencil on duralar and watercolor paper on board  
11 x 14 inches, 2020

Chiejina creates a series of figurative paintings to show painting as a laborious endeavor of building communal relationships with others in trust and love. She practices the art of painting as a way of self-education, improving her ability to love others, despite unfairness, injustice, and agonies we often find in our daily life. Her painting aims to dismantle the negative belief that one should not trust anyone. While growing up in our affluent but competition-driven neoliberal society, she has become accustomed with suspiciousness of others.

The canvas is a battlefield of her inner struggles with herself and a process of unlearning what she has learned. The intention is to be reborn as a new person while cultivating a strong sense of autonomy and pride. Being a person close to the nature of human as socially collective is approached through painting, an act of communicating.





Patterned – déjà vu,  
Watercolor and colored pencil on mixed media paper on board  
11 x 14 inches, 2020

In the pieces, "Déjà vu" and "Artist Brand vs. Persona, Giving Birth to New Ideas", Chiejina thinks about her own sensuality and how it is something that she did not feel safe in expressing. As a person that was raised within a strict household she felt an overwhelming fear of being judged for wanting a partner to connect with, which delayed her from developing emotions that are an essential part of her existence as a heterosexual adult. Chiejina appreciates leopard print and feels the most attractive in it.













Patterned – Realization,  
Colored pencil, acrylic paint, and fabric on watercolor paper on board  
11 x 14 inches, 2020

In “At Night”, she creates an animal with a human and mask-like face. Chiejina reflects on the fetishism of high-fashion black models. Black women aren’t perceived as the standard for beauty yet they are viewed as striking when paired with an exotic animal.





Patterned – Health,  
Acrylic, pen, pencil and colored pencil on watercolor paper on board  
11 x 14 inches, 2020



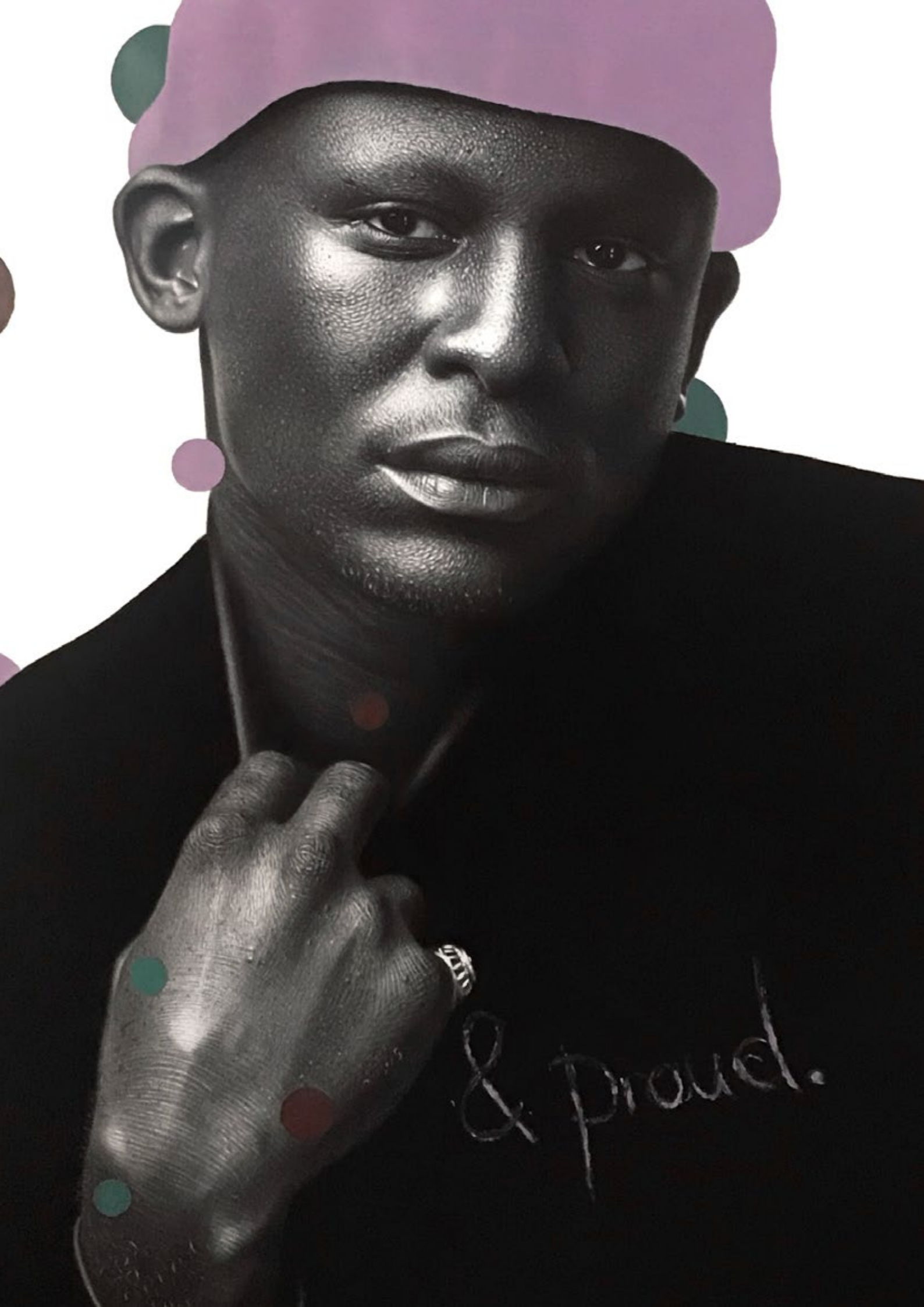
Chiejina's uses eyes to either symbolize her own awareness to past experiences or to depict groups of people in a society. In "Health" and "Realization" Chiejina reflects on the psychological impact traumatic stress has on her body.

*“In a society that tends to avoid change in order to avoid perceived fear, Ify Chiejina uses her canvas as “a battlefield of her inner struggles and a process of unlearning”.*

Anna Kovie Parker







& Proud.

## Curator



Nneoma Ilogu is a creative professional passionate about the use of art to engage, activate, and elicit a better society. She graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Dietetics from University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and a Master's of Public Health (Health Behavior concentration) from the University of Kentucky. Journeying through academia, she realized her desire to create structures and systems in the health industry that foster sustainable and healthy communities. In transitioning to art, she has employed a similar model as she engages with art and its transformative abilities in her managerial capacity at SMO Contemporary Art. Here, she has co-curated multiple local and international exhibitions. She intends to create sensory engaging art experiences, which direct the viewers gaze to matters impacting communities.









SMO Contemporary Art (SMO) is an international art platform, showcasing a unique portfolio of modern and contemporary art from Africa and the Diaspora to a global audience. Based in Lagos, Nigeria, SMO curates exhibitions, as well as public and private art events of leading and emerging talents for a diverse audience. SMO is dedicated to artists of all generations who have been instrumental in shaping West Africa's contemporary art canon and who became crucial in establishing a unique narrative of the continent. The SMO programme sheds light on forgotten talents who have paved the way for new identities in contemporary art while encouraging a vibrant and continuous discourse around their oeuvres.

Regular exhibitions at diverse and unconventional gallery spaces, often affiliated to ecosystems of design, fashion and hospitality, underpin SMO's vision to engage with large and heterogeneous audiences. The platform curates private and public creative events at international venues, and showcases a dynamic portfolio of contemporary art at local and international fairs. Specialized in art advisory services SMO Contemporary curates and manages important private and corporate art collections with a great commitment to documentation, preservation and communication.



Editorial & Art Direction: Sandra Mbanefo Obiago  
Curator: Nneoma Ilogu  
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Contributors: Charlotte Langhorst, Anna Kovie Parker

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