



POLITICS OF
REPRESENTATION

OLIVER
ENWONWU
2020



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OF
REPRESENTATION





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Black and Proud, From the Black and Proud series, 2020, oil on canvas, 40.5 x 40.5cm

Oliver Enwonwu's Political Portraits

Oliver Enwonwu has made an important mark on the Lagos art scene. He has been at the helm of art advocacy as the President of the Society of Nigeria Artists, and in honor of his father's artistic legacy, founded the Enwonwu Foundation with a group of influential collectors, to increase art appreciation and education in Nigeria and beyond. He has curated regular events, exhibitions, and workshops as Founder and Director of Omenka Art Gallery, and contributed to reportage of the African art market as Publicist and Editor-in-Chief of Omenka Magazine, one of the leading art platforms in Africa.

But most people don't realize that behind these professional accomplishments, is a very private, almost hermetic artist, painting quietly within a botanical refuge on the edge of the Lagos lagoon. It is in this green oasis that Oliver's studio sits nestled within a small lush tropical garden, almost completely hidden from the vibrant energy and traffic of Lagos city. One can get lost in the rustle of the leaves and the heady scent of tropical flowers surrounding his studio. It is here, during the corona pandemic lock down, that he took time to re-energize his creative batteries by painting, drawing deep down into his personal artistic reservoir.

Oliver is a talented artist drawn to classic portraiture celebrating black excellence through the human form. I first came across Oliver's art when my husband and I acquired

a large portrait, *Frame*, he showcased at the *Crosscurrents* exhibition at the Lagos Civic Center in 2011. It was a portrait of a man, his gaze as magnetic as his skin, painted in rich stirring and simply unforgettable dark purples and blues. His brush strokes were full of movement, echoing in my collectors' imagination, and registering Oliver as an artist to watch.

His artistic roots as the son of the famous Prof. Ben Enwonwu, one of the most important African artists of the 20th century, were nurtured by both his father and his grandfather, who was a celebrated sculptor in his hometown Onitsha, in Eastern Nigeria.

In *Politics of Representation*, his first solo showcase in fourteen years, Oliver presents diverse portraits in the magnitude of visual classical poetry, exploring traditional dance as the ultimate form of creative expression, and tracing the history of female empowerment in West Africa, and its influence on trade and culture in Europe and beyond. He paints predominantly female figures in aristocratic poise with stoic expression, observing their on-lookers with elegance, formality, and grace. There is a quiet aloofness which exudes from their gaze, as if in defiance of being forgotten, and finally being celebrated with proper recognition.

Oliver's works are inspired by the absence of Black personages in European art history. This glaring omission fueled his desire to fill this huge



Ebony, From the Black and Proud series, 2020, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 62.5cm

void with vibrant portraits depicting black excellence. His female subjects are coiffed with elaborate, elongated and regal head-wraps, like symbols of a heightened mental and moral strength and fortitude. He presents graceful, athletic forms, some in classical dance poses, their flawless dark skin engulfed by folds of rich draped fabric.

In his *Black & Proud Series* he paints most of his subjects in profile with long, graceful necks and pronounced décolletés, high foreheads and prominent cheekbones. They are clothed in defiant red, regal purple, and rich earth-tones, like "Ebony", whose confidence is obvious, as she consciously turns her head and ignores her audience, like a modern-day Queen Nefertiti.



Dakar Rhythm II, From the Belle of Senegal series, 2021, oil on canvas, 199 x 138.5cm

Many of these portraits are inspired by the history of the influential "signares" of Senegal, who originated from the Island of Goree, and were "African and Afro-European women who owned property and achieved high social standing. Historian George Brooks describes signares as entrepreneurial women of means and "social consequence."

It is no wonder that these legendary female business "tycoons" inspired Oliver, somewhat echoing his fathers' famous "Negritude series" which reflected the African liberation movement spearheaded by the Senegalese politician and poet, Leopold Senghor. Oliver's portraits pay homage to the economic prowess and political

leadership of women, and how they were the bedrock of trade across the African continent. He has taken the contemporary *Black Lives Matter* global movement and harnessed it against the 18th and 19th century West African political pioneers.

However, the portrait called *Nne*, is different. Here we see a middle-aged woman sitting in a formal frontal pose, dressed in a traditional Igbo blouse and wrapper. This portrait of his mother, with low cut natural hair, is unusual in its direct gaze and lack of conical head-tie, as if her seniority has afforded her the right of unadorned, natural beauty. Her persona is set against a cloudy background, similar to his masquerade "spirit beings", which he paints against brilliant cumulus clouds. In "Nne" he imbues his mother with spiritual strength, her gaze transcending the burdens and responsibility of matriarchy.

In *The Cult of the People*, the largest work in the exhibition, Oliver presents a group of female dancers in traditional attire, adorned with ivory bracelets on their wrists and ankles. These women represent the titled members of the Otu-Odu Women's Society of Onitsha, who traditionally wore large, extremely heavy elephant tusks on their wrists and ankles, as a sign of the highest form of female achievement, prominence, and power . .



The Cult of the People, 2021, oil on canvas, 152.2 x 202.9cm



Spirit in Flight, 2021, oil on canvas, 147.2 x 145cm

However, Oliver presents these women with lithe, youthful bodies, backs curved in elegant performance, wearing their heavy adornment seemingly effortlessly. His exploration of their leadership and power, is unusual as the women dance with closed eyes, stepping out in self-righteous confidence.

As a counter-point to his female subjects' elan and dignity, Oliver's masquerades are painted in classical dance poses, exhibiting athletic agility mid-air. The artist is clearly influenced by his late father's exploration of the ogolo masquerade, but Oliver's rendition centers around the *spectacle* of their performance, dance, costume, and music, pivoting around an epicenter of traditional and spiritual energy. In *Spirit in Flight*, Oliver paints a lithe masquerade dancing against a thunderous cloudy sky, a masked spirit-being in full cultural regalia. It is from this rhythmic performance that Oliver's art captures our imagination as if we are bystanders enjoying a frenzied traditional dance in the village square, the heat rising as the masquerade twirls with lightning speed.

These masquerades are in contrast to Oliver's male portraits, of Tuareg men from Nigeria's northern Sahel region. His fascination with these mysterious subjects was inspired during childhood, by the highly skilled Tuareg security men who guarded his family home and captured his imagination. These powerful portraits of faces wrapped within a complex circuit of rich twisted fabric, reveal only piercing

wise eyes. They appear to know much more than they care to reveal. Their dry parched skin reflect the dips and troughs of their nomadic journeys, steeped in age-old tradition.

Oliver's diverse portraits reveal his depth of exploration of identity and internal politics affecting the outer world, challenging stereotypes, and filling in important historical gaps. His work makes us take a closer look, and tease out the mental strength and character of his subjects, and their influence through the ages.

In conclusion, we hope you enjoy Oliver Enwonwu's magnificent works, and would like to thank the Alliance Francaise for hosting this exhibition, and Louis Guntrum wines for being a sponsor. Just like the famous Nigerian author and poet, Ben Okri wrote in "Mental Flight", Oliver has been able to take the "gaps" in historical documentation and "shine light and make them something positive".

Sandra Mbanefo Obiago

Curator

Founder & Artistic Director, SMO Contemporary Art

1 Signares by Hillary Jones, Oxford Bibliographies, 2016

2 Ndi Odu, imeobionitsha.org, 2021

3 The Otu-Odu Women also known as Ivory Women of Onitsha, Anambra State, Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation, 2019, Wikimedia



Spirit in Flight, 2021, oil on canvas, 147.2 x 145cm



Dance of the Gods II, 2021, oil on canvas, 99.5 x 78.2 cm



Oliver Enwonwu is the president of the Society of Nigerian Artists, the umbrella professional body for all practicing visual artists in Nigeria. Enwonwu holds a Master's degree in visual arts with distinction from the University of Lagos, Nigeria. He comes from a long line of artists; his grandfather was a reputable traditional sculptor and his father Ben, widely celebrated as Africa's pioneer modernist. In his work, Oliver Enwonwu elevates Black culture to challenge racial injustice and systemic racism by celebrating the cultural, political and socio-economic achievements of Africans through an examination of African spirituality, Black identity and migration, contemporary African politics, Pan Africanism and the global Africa empowerment movement.



Dance of the Gods, 2021, oil on canvas, 142.1 x 203cm



When Gods and Mortals Dance, 2021, oil on canvas, 105 x 99.8cm

Artist's Statement

Strongly figurative, my art interrogates the complex layers of history between the African continent and the West, with portraiture playing a huge part in my oeuvre. Here, I address the near absence of Black personages in accounts of Western art history by adapting 16th century Old Masters' modes of representation and techniques of painting as well as classical poses that imbue an air of power, regality and pride in the sitter.

Comprising mainly of the 'Body of Power', 'Signares', 'Belle of Senegal', and 'Wanderers' series, my portraits are of subjects not always known personally to me and are often idealistic; completely invented or recalled from memory. However, a connecting thread runs through the series evidenced by the fact that the figures all appear confident and their gaze remarkably self-contained and unabashed.

Closely related are the 'Signares' and the 'Belle of Senegal', which deal with the effects of European Imperialism in Francophone West Africa. Significantly, the former explores how the Mulatto French-African women of the Island of Gorée and the city of Saint Louis in French Senegal negotiated their identity in the 18th and 19th centuries. The celebration of the Signares lends weight to arguments that historically, women have also occupied a pride of place in African society. The latter category engages present-day women of Senegal, chronicling their increasing hybridity that absorbs and transforms global fashion trends

yet retains the best aspects of their culture. In a celebration of the African woman, both series are united in the handling of form and rhythm beneath the large volume of apparel, jewelry and adornment.

In 'Body of Power', the body at once becomes a contested site and a weapon of resistance to challenge the status quo. All through history, the body as a theme has always been explored. However, not all bodies are equally valued in every culture; some are regarded highly while others are despised and even censored. In Western accounts of art history, black bodies—complete with kinky hair—are almost excluded, except when they are depicted in servitude. Cultural battles prevail today with controversies revolving around such issues as socially preferred size, shape, age, sexual expression and gaze as well as colour of bodies. The dark almost black bodies of the sitters in the 'Body of Power' series have a common goal to not only resist such narratives but also to act in socio-political protest—the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 readily comes to mind.

The network of lines strewn across the almost corrugated faces of the Tuaregs in 'The Wanderers', are evidence of their far-flung travels that dissolve boundaries and conflate notions of time and space. The lines are also a metaphor for their migratory experience along trodden paths, and more importantly, the history of trade relations between Africa and Europe.



Dakar Rhythm, From the Belle of Senegal series, 2021, oil on canvas, 152 x 91.2cm

In tribute to my father, an incursion into the metaphysical is marked by my series based on contemporary interpretations of traditional African dance and the Onitsha-Igbo masquerade pantheon, *Mmonwu*. Two dominant strains characterise the masquerades; the graceful female *Agbogho-mmuo* and the more aggressive male *Ogolo*. My chief interest lies not in the decorative qualities of their costume but in the rhythmic movement and spirituality of their dance, as well as in their role in bridging the spirit and physical worlds. This thrust is clearly apparent in my engagement with African dance. Here, I draw semblances between the lithe and sinuous bodies stretched to near abstraction in accentuating the rhythm of their often trance-like movements, and the maternal and nurturing qualities inherent in womanhood.

In all, the paintings presented in *Politics of Representation* weave a new narrative by addressing our shifting identities and how we have individually and collectively retained the best parts of our culture and heritage while responding to such significant events as Western education, colonisation, industrialisation and globalisation.

Oliver Enwonwu, CMC, FIMC



Ebony, From the Black and Proud series, 2020, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 62.5cm

Celebrating West African Heritage & Culture

It is only to be expected that Oliver pays homage to his father, the late Prof. Ben Enwonwu (1917-1994), in works such as *Agbogho Mmuo* and *Ogolo*; these masquerades were a great source of influence throughout his father's career, as was his Onitsha Igbo heritage. Just as Oliver's genesis as an artist can be attributed to his father's influence, Ben's own artistic evolution can be expounded in how he saw movement in the traditional figures his father taught him to carve as a young boy. This inherent movement, which developed into Ben's *Africa Dances* series, from which the *Mmonwu* masquerade series emerged, as well as an appreciation for the ideals of feminine beauty, have clearly been passed from father to son yet again. This is acknowledged most cleverly in Oliver's painting *Ronke 2021*, in which his father's most famous painting *Tutu* hangs in the background. *Tutu* is referenced further, and far more subtly, in the elaborate headscarves worn in *Ronke 2020*, *Portraits of Resistance*, *Ebony*, and *Signare*.

Of course, Oliver has forged his own path, and (unlike *Tutu*) his paintings are not portraits in the traditional sense; rather, these figures are conjured from the artist's imagination, each a conflation of experiences, memories and art history. They are mediated onto the canvas through his creative process, itself a concoction of art-historical allusion and elegant forms, which realise the potential for figuration to communicate notions of interiority and thought. Presenting a subject that is at once unknowable and subconsciously familiar, these

fictional figures appear to exist independently of a narrative or history. Instead they encourage the viewer to engage their imagination. Despite their mysterious anonymity, however, Oliver finds ways to imbue his imaginary sitters with a sense of identity, allowing their distinctive features, clothing and compelling posture to give the otherwise unknown character a clear sensibility. Oliver's vivid portraits, depicted in stylish, colourful attire, imbue his subjects with a strong sense of regality, autonomy and self-assertiveness.

Quite aside from the fictive nature of the "sitters", these paintings can also be considered a renegotiation of race and pictorial representation. By centring on West African subjects depicted in the manner of Western portraiture, this body of work is a nuanced insertion of Black figures into a historically white, hegemonic tradition of painting. In taking up the language of Western art history, from the Dutch Golden Age through to the Victorian Era, via a striking painterly aesthetic, Oliver's subjects interrupt the common tropes of portrait painting, blurring lines between tradition and contemporary modes of representation. These paintings are a commentary on the neglect of African figures in art history, on museums filled with Old Master portraits but completely lacking in images of or by people of colour.



Linger, From the Black and Proud series, 2020, oil on canvas, 73.7 x 69.4cm

For centuries, Black people usually only appeared in Western art as peripheral servants or exotic novelties: well-known examples including the woman bearing flowers in the background of Manet's famous nude *Olympia* (1863), or the Moorish page to the left of Van Dyck's 1634 portrait of *Princess Henrietta of Lorraine*. Oliver wants to challenge these racist ideas, and this observation has prompted the artist to create portraits imbued with the elevated dignity, vulnerability and immediacy these subjects have long been denied. In this way, Oliver Enwonwu can be considered in dialogue with other artists of the African diaspora dealing with issues of race in the 21st century, including Kerry James Marshall, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Henry Taylor and Kehinde Wiley. Oliver's work celebrates West African heritage and culture, and challenges the viewer to consider racial inequity across the history of art and crucially at stake in our present moment in time.

Hannah O'Leary

Director/Head
Modern & Contemporary African Art
Sotheby's



Victoria Albis, From the Signare series, 2021, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 91.4cm

Narratives of History & Identity

It's hard to think about our narratives of history and identity without recalling iconic images from figurative art. The Western imagination has been profoundly shaped by painting and portraiture, both in their macro sense of culture, and in their most intimate relationship with beauty.

To turn this gaze on the Signare history offers endless possibilities.

At an aesthetic level, Oliver Enwonwu's portraits offer a new gaze, turned on an intriguing phenomenon that is little known outside Senegal.

Whilst the Senegalese capital Dakar is now a cosmopolitan hub for the whole West African subcontinent, it is the northern city St Louis - on the border with Saharan nation Mauritania - which has witnessed and been shaped by centuries of French influence.

Established as a French trading base in 1659, Saint Louis was for hundreds of years the epicentre of the whole French African empire, and the base from which the colonising European nation spread across the Sahara and Sahel regions of the African continent.

Like the Spanish in Havana, the Portuguese in Bahia, and the Dutch in the Gold Coast, the

French turned Saint Louis into a site of intense exploitation, commercial activity and hybridity - a legacy that is still manifest in the architecture and heritage of the city's inhabitants, and most of all in the Creole culture and its legacies for caste, race, and gender.

Like other Creole societies, in Saint Louis, the offspring of European traders and local women quickly created a new mixed-race population, the 'metis' - a multilingual and multiracial demographic group well positioned to profit from and wield significant power within the colonial structure.

Unlike other Creole societies however, women in St Louis were able to accumulate significant economic power within this elite merchant class.

These 'Signare' women were able to navigate the rapidly emerging colonial power structure, negotiating access to and opportunities from white French rulers, and leveraging this against the mass of the Black Senegalese population.

Oliver Enwonwu's paintings allow us to see these women in figurative glory. An aesthetic that still survives in St Louis today, they are renowned for their extravagant gold jewellery, period French apparel, and remain lavishly adorned in the observance of festivals and the practice of their Catholic faith.



Dakar Rhythm II, From the Belle of Senegal series, 2021, oil on canvas, 199 x 138.5cm

As a prominent Signare woman told me when I filmed with them for a documentary series on art in Senegal, they are adorned with filigree gold because, "the Signares were rich, they were merchants who had high status - we retrace the steps of our ancestors."

"The Signares really marked the spirit of Senegal," she continued. "They were comfortable in their own skin, they spoke French and Wolof very well... they were able to combine both civilisations."

"These women were very powerful, they had a stature, they were social, they did many things."

To gaze upon the beauty and privilege of Black women wielding such visible power and influence in seventeenth and eighteenth century colonial societies is an exhilarating experience.

It is also a problematic one.

The hybrid culture established so early on in Saint Louis - regarded by some as the first European city in Africa - is a powerful metaphor for the colonial subversion of culture and the weaponisation of race that was to sweep the entire continent in the centuries to come.

The ability of Signare women to wield economic power and social capital is a story of how European gender norms were disrupted in St Louis to visible effect. But it did nothing to protect the vast majority of African women from the

removal of traditional knowledge systems and religious structures that saw them co-opted into global capitalism and patriarchal monotheistic values, on terms that were, and continue to be, highly punitive.

On a deeper level, the question I ask as I gaze upon the defiance and dignity of Signare women is to what extent they used their proximity to whiteness, and their economic privilege, to be complicit agents in racist and exploitative colonisation.

It's a question that is as relevant for a mixed-race Diasporan woman in the twenty-first century, as it was when Signare culture first flourished in seventeenth century St Louis.

And like all important questions, the memory and legacy of Signare women is not one that can be interrogated with words alone. As we continue the vast work of remembering and reconciling the complex layers of history between Africa and Europe, it is one for which we need the power and creativity of art.

Afua Hirsch

Wallis Annenberg Chair in Journalism and Communication

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Black and Proud II, From the Black and Proud series, 2021, oil on canvas, 91.5 x 61cm

Oliver Enwonwu: Negotiating Histories in the Digital Age

Oliver Enwonwu's art enmeshes the threads of the past and the fibres of the future together in his hyper figurative works. His body of works continues an ancestral commitment to the arts of Nigeria in a traditional sense and as pioneer modernisers. In the past decade, Oliver Enwonwu has developed his individual direction in art parallel to managing the archive of his father Ben Enwonwu's artistic and anti-colonial legacy at the helm of the family foundation. It is unsurprising that some of the pioneering concerns of early 20th century modernism make a welcome return in Oliver Enwonwu's artistic practice. Elements, which Ben Enwonwu pioneered in the mid-20th century, such as his search for expressions of African self-empowerment as spirit/form in recourse to Igbo-Nigerian rich cultural tradition, remain essential in Oliver Enwonwu's work with a contemporary nod to social media imagery and Afro-futurist aesthetics. As president of the Society of Nigerian Artists, Oliver Enwonwu is immensely dedicated to ensure that the cultural socio-economic empowerment of Nigerian and African artists continues to gain traction.

The predominant focus of Oliver Enwonwu's practice is the exploration of portraiture as a genre, which ranges from realist to allegorical representations of contemporary, historical and mythological subjects. Portrait painting is a powerful root genre of 20th century Nigerian modernism. The relatively young art form, introduced only just over a century ago, holds a special place in pan-African culture and in

Nigerian art history of the 20th century; it is of extraordinary importance.

Situating Portraiture in Art History

In 1920, Aina Onabolu carved out a new pathway for a Nigerian art practice and art history, which he outlined in his seminal text "A Short Discourse of Art", after pioneering painted portraiture as a Nigerian art genre. Onabolu discussed oscillating African and European paradigms, without favouring either. The foundations of Onabolu's portraiture of Nigeria's elite stem from a fortunate convergence of modern visualisations of *oriki*, Yorùbá praise poetry, the idealised portraiture of the social elite by the 18th century Scottish artist Joshua Reynolds and the rise of the West African photography studio practice. The following generation of artists was critical of the outwardly European appearance, although not the essence, of Onabolu's works. Notably Ben Enwonwu, despite his critical stance, also embraced portraiture within his anti-colonial practice, but he developed it further, underpinned by the epistemology of Negritude and Afro-surrealism.

Contemporary Portraiture and the Legacy of Historicist Modernism

Signares

Oliver Enwonwu's practice rests on the strength of both approaches, but in a far more contemporary spirit the heightened realism of his portraiture traces



Victoria Albis, From the Signare series, 2021, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 91.4cm



Musa, From the Wanderer series 2020, oil on canvas, 61 x 50.5cm

West African real and mythological figures in the age of social media. In the related series of *Belles of Senegal* or *Signares*, both the historically accurate and the mythologised narrative, merge. Both titles refer to 18th century Senegalese and Senegalese Creole female entrepreneurs in the Transatlantic Slave and commodity trade who secured and grew their wealth by marrying into French colonialist families. Their power and independence in the context of 18th century Imperialist patriarchy and racism was received with admiration and suspicion in equal measure. It is undeniable though that the Signares' achievements contributed in no small measure to the coastal socio-cultural development. Traveller's accounts written by white men often portray the Signares as alluring, conceited figures. Their Senegalese female peers also distanced themselves from the Signares, as they transgressed interracial boundaries and cultural moralities in order to succeed. What slipped past these narrow views was that the real power of the tradeswomen was their complex cultural enmeshment. In their meritocratic equality often to white men and the local leverage held, they occupied a complex position, typical of what Claude Ake calls "Africa's internal contradiction" in the colonial era. Today the soft power of the Signares is receiving renewed attention. Among the young educated women of Senegal today, the typical "mouchoir" of a Signara, a high wrapped headdress, has become a symbol of contemporary female emancipation and female self-sufficiency. The Signares' once derided allure is now celebrated on Instagram accounts as the self-confidence of fashionable

and intelligent modern women. It is indeed wonderfully open to interpretation, if the women in Oliver Enwonwu's paintings represent the historical Signares in their elegant clothes or the chic swagger of latter-day hipster Anna Pépins.

In Oliver Enwonwu's paintings, the *Belles* or *Signares* always appear as a trio viewed from afar with one central woman beckoning with a haughty glance over the shoulder. They appear elegant, self-assured and untouchable as a group. The female figures are slightly elongated and captured mid-stride in a nod to the conventions of Negritude. The strong shading of their flowing garments and their muscular youthful bodies lends a structural element to the painting. The work is also a strong example of Oliver Enwonwu's style of hyper figuration, an idealised, slightly fantastical style achieved by soft modelling of the muscular shading and the enhanced geometry of the garment folds.

King's Guards

Oliver Enwonwu's treatment of the Signares' motif is symbolic for a narrative thread of African empowerment throughout his works. Consequently his portraiture is often situated in the space between contemporary reality and historical and cultural mythology. Enwonwu's series "The King's Guard" are portraits of weathered male faces of nomadic horsemen. Mythologised as Tuareg, they originated from the medieval settled nomads of northern Nigeria, the Fulani of mixed Arabic and



Ali, From the Wanderer series 2020, oil on canvas, 77 x 59cm

Sengambian origin who were the horsemen of Northern Emirs since Medieval times. Throughout history they were admired for their tenacity and nimble strength as warriors. On the occasion of contemporary Eid celebrations, the horsemen still participate in the *Hawan Sallah* in the cosmopolitan centres across Nigeria. It is said that during colonial times their tradition was culturally appropriated by the British colonial administration and renamed Durbar festival by importing an Urdu term from northern India. On the occasion of FESTAC 1977, the landmark cultural festival of African arts under the artistic co-directorship of Ben Enwonwu, the traditional celebration's name officially reverted to *Hawan Sallah* or *Hawan Daushe* in a significant move to celebrate the ethnically diverse cultures of Nigeria on their own terms.

Oliver Enwonwu's paintings of the warrior *King's Guards* are almost monochrome. By channelling the quality of archival prints, the works embrace the commemorative aspect of the historical tradition of Emirs. The horsemen are portrayed close-up with the forceful mostly frontal gaze of their faces framed by the artful drapery of their *alasho* turbans. Implicit in the strong contrasts of light and dark shading is the emphasis on the fierceness and courage of a warrior type as a form of heroic portraiture. The meticulously painted detail of their weathered skin in young and old faces alike is beautifully realist, charting their life experience as soldiers with a mobile or semi-nomadic lifestyle. Experiencing the works as an on-going series, however, focuses our attention

on the nameless horsemen's uniform silent forcefulness, which serves to mythologise the strength and fierce loyalty of the king's guards. In this manner the close-ups of *King's Guards* are celebratory portraits of the Fulani-Hausa warriors as part of Nigerian high culture.

The horseman as a figure symbolising fierce honour and dedication to the community is not without precedent in Nigerian culture. The most famous play by the seminal author Wole Soyinka "Death and the King's Horseman" from 1975 centres on the figure of a Fulani horseman as a catalyst in the complex encounter between divergent cultures in the charged colonial context. The figure of Elesin, the horseman, in Soyinka's considered portrayal is not an anti-colonial hero but rather more a complex figure at the crossroads of historical and modern realities. Soyinka reminded the audience of his play of their responsibility to act independently and steadfast in situations which require the consideration of community values or the wellbeing of society as a whole.

In this sense, Oliver Enwonwu's choice to depict the *King's Guards* as an on-going motif through out his works for almost a decade has to be seen as symbolic. It offers a visualisation of the quality of being steadfast and principled when it comes to the tug-wars between communally beneficial actions and pan-African pride both internally and in the face of global challenges. Here Oliver Enwonwu's *King's Guard* motif diverges from the tragedy of Soyinka's Elesin



Spirit in Flight,
2021, oil on canvas, 147.2 x 145cm



Dance of the Gods II, 2021, oil on
canvas, 99.5 x 78.2 cm

as a more transcendent ideal of virtue and strength, which can be understood as a spiritual guide for a globally networked world.

Agbogho Mmuo

In the celebration of Nigerian ethnic and cultural diversity, Oliver Enwonwu carries on the legacy of his ancestral heritage, in particular the commitment of his father Ben Enwonwu to cross-cultural respect in the context of pan-Africanism. Both Enwonwu also share an on-going commitment to preserving and exploring the familial Igbo roots in a continued engagement with ancestral legacies. Working in series once more Oliver Enwonwu revisits a motif which Ben Enwonwu engaged strongly throughout his lifetime and which is inextricably linked to a deep spirituality and connection to the masquerades. Oliver Enwonwu recently reactivated the motif of the *Abgogho Mmuo*, the Igbo maiden spirit or mask that represents a female essence. The mask embodies a range of qualities ranging from gentility to vigour expressed as *agbala-nwanyi*. The essence of *Agbogho Mmuo*, in the varied interpretations that exist, can be summed up as a communal and nurturing spirit, which is dynamic, and can react to societal shifts. In historic Igbo customs, wooden figures, which represent the *Agbogho Mmuo*, already exist as icons. In the late nineteen forties Ben Enwonwu re-activated *mmuo* as paintings, both the female essence of *Agbogho mmuo* but also the male dynamic of metamorphosis of *Ogolo* and its connection to mortality. Oliver Enwonwu's *Agbogho mmuo* departs from the early painterly figuration of

this motif in his father's interpretation. It takes its cue from the specific dancing pose of the masquerade in Ben Enwonwu's original work from 1949. The repetition of the pose is faithful to the original painting but the hyper figuration he applies reacts to contemporary image reproduction and digital flattening of colours and patterns. In choosing the female essence of *agbala-nwanyi* over *Ogolo*, Oliver Enwonwu emphasises a future orientated inflection of the reconciliatory aspect of *mmuo* and the beauty of *Ada-mma*, the young female spirit. The materialised spirit in the painting is a central figure set in a surreal landscape with purple evening clouds and the dusk falling on the vast plain and forest landscape far away near the horizon. The masquerade is bathed in stark light achieving an idealised and heightened realism, which displays a definition, which reminds of push-processed analogue film or the HD sharpness of digital imagery. The extreme clarity and hyper-real colours befit the representation of masquerade as a conduit for humanity as the essence of collective experience. In actively embracing a digital quality in his painting he revitalises the *Agbogho mmuo* as a spirit fit for the 21st century. Despite the convergence of multiple spiritualities in most contemporary lifestyles the connection to *ani-mmuo* (spirit-space) of familial ancestors remains a lived spirituality connected to major events for Igbo-Nigerians. For Oliver Enwonwu, *Agbogho Mmuo* undoubtedly also signifies the connection between father and son, spiritually and artistically.

Oliver Enwonwu's body of works engages past histories, which are always on the cusp of being forgotten. His paintings remind of the importance of legacies and history making as visual epistemologies. This includes the flexible adaptation of his ancestral cosmologies, such as *mmuo*, to continuously changing contexts and also as pan-African metaphysics. His hyper figuration makes the reflection of the stylistic possibilities of the digital age and Afro-futurist approaches possible without distracting from the narrative of historical and mythological figures, which celebrate African pride, power and achievement.

Bea Gassmann de Sousa

Founder / Director
theAgency Gallery & Office for Contemporary
Art Research

1 Aina Onabolu, 'A Short Discourse on Art', 1920, Smithsonian Library digital

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Musa, From the Wanderer series, 2020, oil on canvas, 61 x 50.5cm



Ali, From the Wanderer series, 2020, oil on canvas, 77 x 59cm



Ronke, 2020, oil on canvas, 92 x 61.5cm

Navigating History: Time and Space in the Reconstruction of Gender and the Allures of the Female African

It is not out of place to reverence history. Our lives are history as the definition of the discipline stands. Generally regarded as the narrative of the past about our experiences as time fleets, that past remains all we have lived for, as the future is in anticipation. History reminds us where we have been and what remains of us. History is a fact of time and space coordinates where we have acted, initiated ideas and innovations that benefited us, and put the human person on various spotlights for good, the bad, and a few things in between. In the not too distant past, the reality of history has been challenged for the so-called marginal cultures. The colonisation and a civilising mission undertaken by the West come to mind here. The West appropriated for itself the only society with history. Oliver Enwonwu's work here is a visual narrative aimed at restitution of that acutely denied reality of the human race. The denial was premised on the rabid assumption that Europe was the "best fruit of all times" in human civilisations. Oliver Enwonwu thus confronts us with a translation of the past in a relatively exciting subject in art history. His work, dominated by portraiture, comes as an apt response to reposition the reality and imagination of history in Africa.

Enwonwu brings into this exhibition a reclamation of the West's historicist plan. The schema remains a negation of equality among all. His plan focuses on the repositioning of values and answers to the cultural restitution of non-Western cultures. He puts it this way,

"[h]ere, I address the near absence of Black personages in accounts of Western art history by adapting 16th century Old Masters' modes of representation and techniques of painting." Oliver Enwonwu's approach to the reclamation of identity and space redefines contestations in the identity complex in the postcolonial ferment.

One significant engagement of the human family that reinforces history is the art object in any form and enactment. In so far as art history is, the artist is the assumed custodian of history. No one among the human community is as responsive to the dictates of time as the artist. The artist's conscience despises fleeting time with ease by converting occurrences and authentic experiences into definable codes and metaphors or works of art. Yet, the artist may not be aware of the impact of their work. Nevertheless, the artist is usually not aware of the symbolic value of the art work.

In our era, defined by many terms such as postmodern, postcolonial, alter-modernism and the cultural turn, incidences of cultural revisions abound among the previously colonised. A significant confrontation focuses on the word "international" as a Western concept. The term guaranteed the hold of Western epistemology on other cultures. As a Western action, international, as conceived, denies authenticity to different cultures that make up our humanity. Heinz Kimmerle (1996:



Dakar Rhythm, From the Belle of Senegal series, 2021, oil on canvas, 152 x 91.2cm

15), therefore, provides for “the concept of a ‘multiversome’ of cultures.” He states that all world cultures are of the same age and have fulfilled their responsibility regarding the essence of culture, which is survival. The question is how history and memory aid the articulation of difference, that unique cultural content that sets cultural groups apart.

The images Oliver Enwonwu confronts us with embody history. Firstly, the historical here relates the identity of the works presented as signs that address the past and how the present gains from there. However, the artist informs that his art “interrogates the complex layers of history between the African continent and the West, with portraiture playing a huge part in my oeuvre. “The spatial complexity that is shriveled here can be enigmatic where one disinvests imagination from metaphysical correctness. The artist’s creativity will always ensure that the metaphor from his or her atelier represents reality.

Portraits are about the individual. Cynthia Freeland (2010: 74) highlights this attribute of the portrait observing that portraits provide “a recognisable physical body, engages characterisation and the presentation of oneself for representation. She goes further to note four important functions of the portrait. “They provide likeness, psychological characterisations, proofs of presence or ‘contact’, and manifestations of a person’s ‘essence’ or air.” Portraits thus are a complex manifestation of the individual.

The art of portraiture is as old as the practice of art. In Africa, early portraits were idealistic. The Apollo Cave in Namibia hosts, for example, The White Lady of Brandberg. The formal style that characterises the art of pharaonic Egypt can be traced to The White Lady. The Greeks appropriated the style of the Egyptians and maintained its idealistic frame. The Romans provided the idea of realism in individual portraiture. Contemporary portraiture above that Freeland discusses, is traced to the post Renaissance era. The Renaissance era inspires Oliver Enwonwu, who adapts the “16th century Old Masters’ modes of representation and techniques of painting.”

The privilege to revisit the past in attempts at cultural translation is what Oliver Enwonwu presents. The Renaissance model becomes for him an act in intercultural appropriation. The narrative about history and how it reinforces memory is the mainstay of the formal investment in the works discussed. The less narrated escapades of the female folk who is African are the focus here.

The Portraits of Resistance presents a cluster of dominantly portrait images in residual tonal intensities against the central female figure. Thus the composition comes to view in a congested ground in relation to the main image. The clusters that frame the background are some icons of power found in African cosmology. These include the mask and humanoid figures and the portrait of a lion. The marine scenes



Portraits of Resistance, 2021, oil on canvas, 82.7 x 110.4cm

and set of a chaotic sky background and a motley of other forms build up this background. The main subject of the painting is the image of a woman in profile on a typically straight neck and shoulder frame that is frontal. The image looks stern and robust, with a lean, elegant face of a middle-aged woman. A certain ambivalence is constructed around her characterisation. The elaborate wrap that covers her hair and head becomes her symbolic identity. This personality in its firmness is elusive except for the background clusters that frame the figure. The characters become key associative icons that define her personality.



Ali, From the Wanderer series 2020, oil on canvas, 77 x 59cm

The image of the lion located top left of the picture frame contrasts with the power of the sea below it as icons of power and control. However, at the lower right is the image of a nude recumbent male figure in a diving posture out of the picture plane. But the cluster below the buoyant head-tie of the central figure is mainly female, including the male diving figure. The image of *Orisha Oko*, a member of the Yoruba theogony and metaphysical mother of the Orishas, is recognisable in its elaborate coiffure, usually coned and tapering from the side of the head layered into a cone. Legend has it that he is the husband of *Yemoja*, and his goodwill concerns agriculture and harvest, hence a keeper of life. The ‘Portraits of Resistance’ embodies metaphysical powers over life, including goodwill and the control of fortunes. This status is personified in a female defined by a strength of character.

‘The Wanderer Series’, also in the portrait genre, is the only characterisation that features the male and is frontal. The figure is fully turbaned and composed in the pyramidal structure introduced in early portrait paintings. Its background of umber that diminishes into a tint frames the figure. Inebriating the image are its naked eyes, and the Tuaregs are known with this dress identity. The Tuaregs belong to a sizable Berber ethnic federation. Principally, they inhabit the Sahara and the Sahel regions of Africa that stretch from far southwestern Libya to southern Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. They are mainly nomadic pastoralists. Small groups of them are also found in northern Nigeria. Their typical dress, as the painted figure here presents, is their traditional appearance in public. The Tuareg wrap or turban is an ecologically related dress mode, as it moisturizes the areas around the nose and the lips. The dominant colour they wear – dark-blue – is a solution that reduces the UV radiation to which the open desert is exposed. The characterisation here also aligns with resilience. This is more so that the pyramidal composition is nothing other than a solo image of a past middle-aged man. The realistic colour scheme is rendered with diligence, and the openness it confers presents a profoundly introspective character. Another in the series of “The Wanderer Series” is the unveiled man. Compared with the figure in the turban, it emerges from an agitated background and presents an anxious persona, even in a similar pyramidal composition. However, it provides the dress application option to the fully turbaned dress code of the Tuaregs.



Ebony, From the Black and Proud series, 2020, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 62.5cm



Ronke II, 2021, oil on canvas, 149.5 x 100cm

Besides the cluster of 'The Wanderer Series', other series are of feminine casts. They are mentioned here in no particular order. The 'Black and Proud Series' is here represented in *Ebony*. It comes with the strength of character associated with *Portraits of Resistance*. As a dress, its drapery comes out elaborate and stylish contemporary fashion known as "cold shoulder." Like *Portraits of Resistance*, the face is in profile. Such a pose easily establishes characterisation, as seen in both portraits. However, in *Ebony*, a bright background lights up the figure against a monochromatic scheme that depended on the ochre, burnt umber, and white. The 'Signares Series' pair with the 'Black and Proud Series' in many ways except in the apparent calm deportment associated with them, including easing the acute angularity that marks the profile faces. One encounters another deviation in a frontally balanced painting in the 'Signares Series' with an architectonic head-tie of a lady holding a fan.

On the other hand, *Ronke* is seated with a contra-posed frontal-oriented face and dressed entirely in red. The composition introduces a domestic alternative into the series of compositions that are mainly pyramidal and detached. The equally famous *Tutu* portrait is planted in this picture as a possession of the artist and authentication of his identity. With authentication and identity is *Ogolo*, a visual profiling reminiscent of Ben Enwonwu's prolific dancing figure compositions.

Effective with the 'Wanderer' is the strategy of beholding, which the artist brings into some compositions. Hence, I concentrate on the pictures consisting of the female figures. I consider other compositions as minor and sub-dominant within the oeuvre. An identity the works share is their almost impersonal encounter as they are, almost all, bereft of the act of beholding. The images recall traditional dress styles of matured African women whose wrappers did not exceed the shoulders. In these female personalities, tradition is translated in the contemporary fashion seen in their dressing. The dress code accords to cultural authentication as it establishes their locus. The female figure in Leopold Sedar Senghor's *Black Woman* is presented in a metaphoric language that profiles these personalities, especially in the composition *Portraits of Resistance*.

Senghor notes in the *Black Woman* thus,

... And your beauty strikes me to the heart like the flash of an eagle. Naked woman, dark woman firm-fleshed ripe fruit, sombre raptures of black wine, mouth making lyrical my mouth

Savannah stretching to clear horizons, Savannah shuddering beneath the east wind's eager caresses Carved tom-tom, taut tom-tom, muttering under the conqueror's fingers.

Your solemn contralto voice is the spiritual song of the beloved.

Portraits of Resistance inspires the above lyrical



Dakar Rhythm II, From the Belle of Senegal series, 2021, oil on canvas, 199 x 138.5cm

riff, which Senghor invests in the *Black Woman*. The visual metaphors built around her in the rendition by Oliver Enwonwu come to mind here.

Note that Senghor wrote this poem in 1945 when the anticolonial/decolonisation rhetoric was gathering impetus. It constituted one of the ideological frames of Negritude. Negritude remains an ideological road map that has been vilified without coming to terms with its tenets, especially the Senghorian enunciation. I do not wish to elaborate on Negritude as space here does not permit but suffice it to say that it is an ideology that Africa's liberation should consider again. The image of resistance is about power and its appreciation. Power concerns domination. Edward W. Said (2002: 187-197) comments on the notion of power by Michel Foucault and calls attention to the nature of discourse as a strategy towards domination and power. I suggest that *Portraits of Resistance* is a metaphor grounded in discourse. Its assemblage of icons symptomatic of power suggests such imputation.

Rayan Minor in "The Signares of Senegal and the construction of gender in the 18th-century Atlantic world require a preview here. During the precolonial era, male European traders who desired to establish themselves locally entered into marriage agreements with local women and the influential in Senegal. These marriages were recognised by the French authorities overseas and the local establishments. The

offspring of these marriages became known as Signares. The island of Gorée was their main place of domicile. The value the women possessed was their artfulness in bargaining, negotiating, and acting as cultural interpreters for their foreign husbands. Such an alliance eventually converted many of them to powerful and wealthy players in commerce and the economy within their locale. Their status of mixed cultures elevated them to the position of the elite in their society. Minor sums up the personality of these powerful women as challenging

stereotypical understandings of gender binaries. Signares shatter simplistic notions of gender in two important ways. First, Signares show us that women have held strong positions, typically associated with men, without having to act like men themselves. And second, they teach us that not all societies have understood gender in the same way. ... Thus, despite regularly participating in worlds typically associated with European masculinity, Signares maintained their own versions of feminine display.



Portraits of Resistance, 2021, oil on canvas, 82.7 x110.4cm

African societies through history offer instances of women of courage in Queen Idia of the Benin Kingdom, Queen Amina of Zauzau, and Woyengi among the people of Kalabari, among others. The historical consciousness that Oliver Enwonwu presents in this exhibition gives points of reconstruction about gender roles and construction blurred by colonisation. Colonisation offered a typically narrow understanding of gender roles in African communities. *Portraits of Resistance* stands in this exhibition as a metaphor for the cluster of the feminine collection that this exhibition parades; it reconstructs how to understand notions of gender that are not Western. The focus on gender, especially the role of the Signares in their society, presents African instances regarding gender and its relation to masculinity. The compositions restate the seamless relationship in African cultures where women and men play their assigned roles.

The paintings in this exhibition remain historical narratives coded in metaphors to construct gender roles, specifically the feminine gender in an African contemporary culture. It contends with the notions from the West that with the colonisation agenda assigned incongruous roles to the female folk in Africa.

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Ronke II, 2021, oil on canvas, 149.5 x 100cm

The Ronke Portraits: On Representation and Intercultural mobilities

Oliver Enwonwu's current body of work explores the concept of portraits as signifiers within a complex political, historical and pan-Africanist rhetoric. These portraits, charged with diverse emotions and somewhat urbane expressions and postures, underscore a transposition of art historical regimes conveyed within the intersection of colonial genres and intercultural mobilities. This focus motivates an impetus that unsettles a totalising Western standard of representation and provides a historical shift that implicates a reappraisal of the lopsided parallelisms between constructions by Western art history and the silencing of Black personages. The works likewise feature photographic canons of portraiture and their analogous relationships with the portrait painting tradition within modern art history. He, therefore, engineers a historical descent that heralds a complex juncture marked by indigenous histories and its navigations of multicultural contacts that defined early artistic modernity.

Oliver Enwonwu's portrait paintings and the narratives they construct all invite multiple appraisals that pander to a notion of political and socio-cultural frameworks. The images of Ronke a subject matter embody a noble, elitist, and the attitude of a socialite knotted to a critical space, Enwonwu presents a middle-aged lady, from two positions, whose embodied state at both moments speak disparately to the idea of personhood, hybridity, and national history, couched in an artistic legacy that evokes the last exemplar in the paintings of *Tutu* by his

father, Professor Benedict Enwonwu, of blessed memory.

The Ronke portraits are examples of sartorial exactness and, thus, suggest broader categories within a specific colonial Lagosian corporeality with its rich blend of interculturalities, that included repatriate slaves from the Americas and Sierra Leone, indigenous peoples, Europeans, and even merchants along the West African coast, and facilitated by a vibrant Transoceanic and Afro-Brazilian heritage. As a bustling cosmopolis, Lagos boasted about 25,083 persons as of 1860, including a Sierra Leonean repatriate population of about 300 and 130 Brazilian emancipado families. However, these figures soared within the coming decades and had the Brazilian emancipados located at the Lagos island in a space called Brazilian quarters (Popo Aguda or Popo Amaro) at 3,221. Coming from the Bahia and Salvador region of Brazil, the repatriates initially had little finance to establish trade and continued with their technical occupations as tailors, carpenters, architects, etcetera. However, many Sierra Leonean returnees retained their knowledge of the Yoruba language and culture, paired with British-inspired education. These early attempts at permanently socializing, rescued Africans using European (specifically British) standards of literary and industrial education, produced various literates, Christians, and Black Africans who were also well-tutored in the new political economy. Nonetheless, these set of people rose later to be affluent tradespeople and



Ronke, 2020, oil on canvas,
92 x 61.5cm

experts in their fields of specialty and remained at the fore of the burgeoning city of Lagos.

So who was *Ronke*, and how could her personality be established? Judging from the formal outlay of the paintings and the name she bears, she most appropriately descends from an aristocratic Yoruba family. But the apparent radical hybridity of her dress, the architectural built form, and her individuality were likely to suggest otherwise. These representation standards are corroborated by the structure of photographs of elites at about the same period and context. In the portrait entitled *Ronke I*, signed and dated 2020, a near middle-aged lady's solemn three-quarter pose looms over the picture frame. She maintains a formal demeanor, and stares ahead, relatively absentmindedly blank, away from the viewer. Her comported and austere air is heightened by a minimal dress adornment and her left arm resting humbly between the thighs. Her face is expressionless, save for the hypnotic gaze that tries to entrap the viewer. Her possibly bogus hairstyle is appropriately covered with an orange head-tie that closely wraps it. The neck is slightly elongated and without pearls or jewelry pieces, although a modest pearl adorns her left ear. The dress she wears covers her body much like the way the head-tie wraps the hair. Purplish in its rendition, its heavy draperies freely flow down the body and presents an overall impression of calm demeanor.

The *Ronke II*— the same person—maintains the rather comported individuality akin to the *Ronke I*. Although the painting is livelier in its execution, the subject matter continues with a similar facial expression, a blank stare, a similar dress, and a left hand resting firmly on the thigh. *Ronke* wears a natural braided weave and is adorned in a cumbersome flowing reddish-orange gown whose drapes outline the planal movements of her visible left arm and the legs it rests upon. What is compelling about the portraits, especially the *Ronke II*, is the meticulous realism and compositional atmosphere. However, the portraits' air betrays this notion where extravagance speaks to the exquisite furniture and the home's décor in which she sits. *Ronke II* sits with a lady's honesty on an ornate Victorian-style chair, embellished with a luxurious velvety cloth and finely sculpted lion heads and paws. Her poise is accentuated with the exotic wooden boards that make the floor, the light purplish wall décor, an equally ornate side stool carrying a blue vase, with a portrait directly hanging over it on the wall. All these define *Ronke* as rooted within a wealthy aristocratic lineage, with the trappings of a princess.

But what more do these portrait compositions reveal, and how do we validate the *Ronke* portraits as belonging to a shared history of Lagos metropolis, impacted heavily upon by the emancipados? Does an analytic Hursellian diachronic framework permit investigations into similar cultural productions with proximate regimes to offer validations into the *Ronke*

portraits in an Afro-Brazilian corporeality? To respond is to contemplate the series of cultural productions and its linkages to hybridity and national history. While several scholars and documentations attest to the power, status, and lifestyles of returnees as shaping a new Lagos metropolis, a critical statement always has to do with the subtending Victorian cultural legacy evident in the dress and fashion, including stately mansions that defined the era. These Neo-Baroque mansions dominated the buildings ranging from private residencies to mosques and churches. Along with a range of Victorian dress sense, they, without doubt, connect them with the Afro-Brazilian legacy of the Lagos metropolis.

In the *Ronke II* portrait, the splendid interior reminds of a typical elite status and culture. Hence its conspicuous inclusion of *Tutu* in the *Ronke* painting highlights this ancestral and historical relationship even further. The display of photographs and works of art as befitting complements of their exotic architectures also appealed not only to their appreciation of the arts, but it also expresses consummate taste as suitable of their personalities. To access art, one must have a taste, and it is an aesthetic judgment that is underscored by preference. Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.

Similarly, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's backing of the cultivation of taste imbues it with the concept of class differentiation. For Bourdieu, taste isn't natural but cultural,

something produced. The appreciation of the arts and culture forms a way of strengthening social differences and self-distinguishing, which demonstrates class.

The subject matter of the painting hanging on the wall of the *Ronke II* entitled *Tutu*, interestingly made by the artist's father, whose apparent influence in his artistic development continues to inspire his oeuvre, allude to a later period and a genealogical connection to the *Ronke* represented. The intriguing *Tutu* painting made in 1974 during the father's sojourn in Ile-Ife carries a transnational history. Originally belonging to three, it vanished after its creation, only to resurface in a London apartment in 2018 to a frenzied global art market. The painting depicts Adetutu 'Tutu' Ademiluyi, a young member of the royal family of Ile-Ife the granddaughter of the former ruler of Ife. Beyond posing for the series of *Tutu* paintings, her gaze defiantly disconnects from the artist and viewers alike to evoke formalities with European renaissance traditions.

With the *Ronke* paintings, Enwonwu re-enacts an artistic process similar to his father's. While they both are of the Igbo nativity, the choice of Yoruba subjects marks a primary level of intraculturality. Like Adetutu, Aderonke equally posed for the portrait sessions, beyond both having close family ties as princesses of Ile-Ife, Aderonke being the great-granddaughter of the late Ooni Ajagun Ademiliyu. Enwonwu's return to the royal family, for yet the making

of another series of royal portraits succeeds in highlighting a radical departure within the years since *Tutu* was made. Although the tradition of looking away from the artists exists in the paintings of *Ronke*, Enwonwu's inclusion of an associative space in *Ronke II* speaks louder of her class compared to the *Tutu* series that shows her as a modestly appareled, but proud and unassuming royalty, making her more closely linked to *Ronke I*. Aderonke Ademiluyi, however, a certified lawyer, is a fashionista and a key player in the fashion industry, an identity Enwonwu remarkably captured.

Cynthia Frelander submits that portraits pose the tendency to "reveal the sitter's subjectivity or self-conception; and to exhibit the artist's skills, expressive ability, and to an extent views on art, and to add further that portraits reveal status and artists push themselves to reveal power, wealth and authority" remains true. Her distinction between a narrative painting and a portrait is an apt classification here. The *Tutu* series and the *Ronke I* are recognised as portraits, where the *Ronke II* becomes a narrative portrait painting. As Frelander submits, it is a display in which sitters position themselves within recognisable symbolic spaces: to be read as driving a mutuality, funding the recognition of status, finery, wealth, etcetera of which characterise the personality of *Ronke II*. These interconnections frame a contiguous relationship with the past and present and the series of appropriations, continuities, and discontinuities as well as disjuncture that had followed. The *gele* and the shoulder shawl on

the painting *Tutu*, all of which are absent in *Ronke II*, remain original to the Yoruba dress sense but assumed novel sensibilities in Brazil and Cuba.

Enwonwu's artistic inventories counter the West's notion as a shining beacon to nations within the peripherality of its vision. In executing this function, he re-examines prevailing colonial legacies of the passage of histories. He restructures Black personages and their remarkable achievements through a critical juxtaposition of Black inventiveness as a powerful tool in dismantling stereotypes and grand meta-narratives that continue to subvert proper African art histories in global discourses. The two works under review, and indeed a large portion of his oeuvre, remain implied in this protest against Western representations of Africa and Africans.

Cynthia Frelander's philosophical perspectives for this preoccupation, although not limited to individuality, expression, self-knowledge, represent artistic efforts at studies on themselves or other people, she says. And then describing the portraitist as an alchemist whose interventions regarding persons and their physical embodiments remain pathways to the revelation of psychological awareness, consciousness, and deeper emotional life of the sitter, all of which stay true regarding these paintings' essences, matter. While the *Ronke* portraits serve to establish a colonial presence and cross-cultural influence, they

stand even stronger to reveal the African's sense of appropriation and implementation of alien artefacts. Hence these paintings traverse multiple cultural regimes and differences and function as evidence of cultural reciprocity, bridge historical periods while offering mediations to the interrelatedness of cultures and history.

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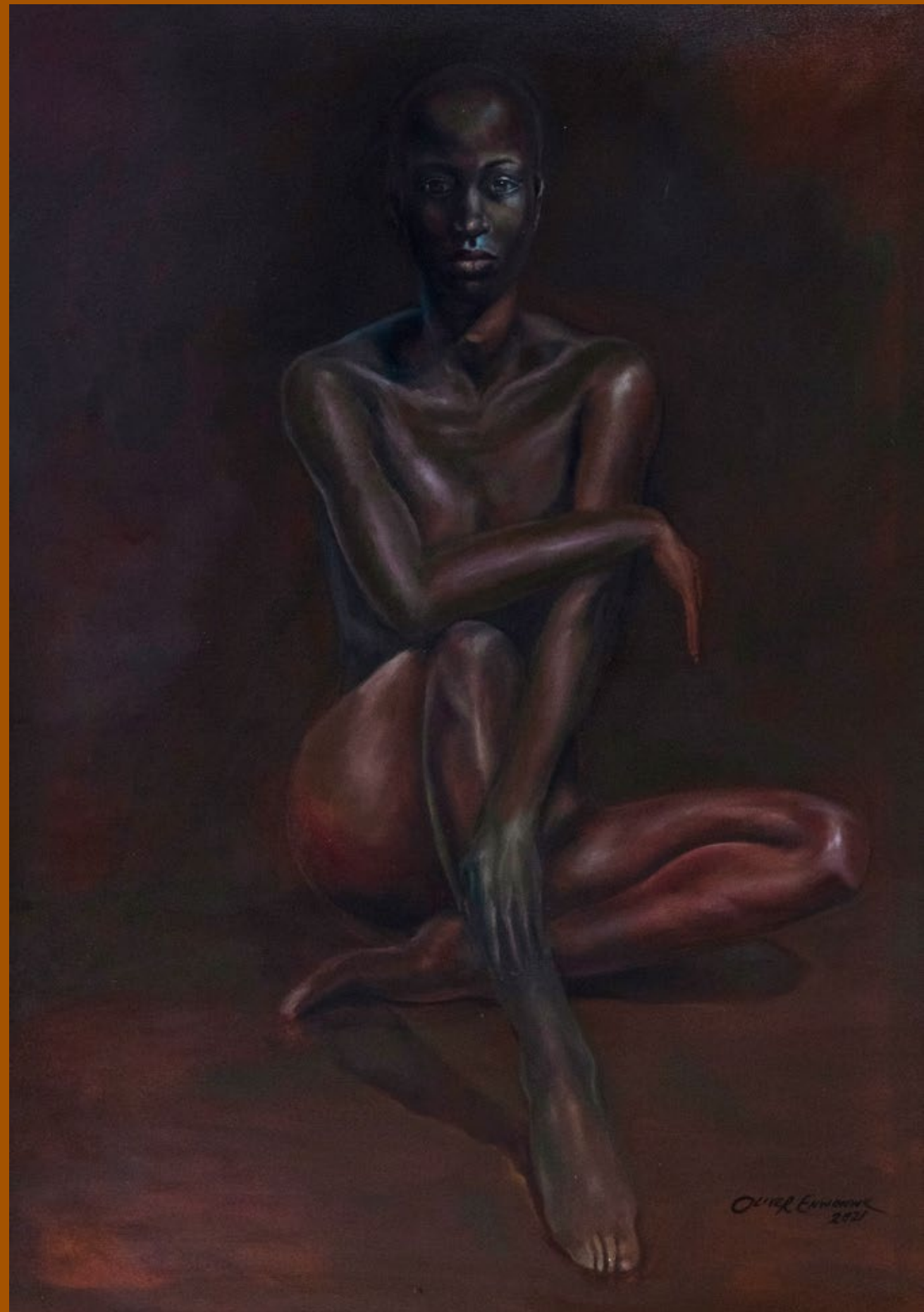
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Interculturality, and the Mnemonics of Afro-European identities in the Post Colony

In Oliver Enwonwu's solo exhibition, one encounters a unique archive of portrait paintings inspired by queries of absence of African personages in the artistic milieus of the 16th – 19th century Western art history. Despite Afro-European cross-vergences marked by European civilisation and further explorations on African soil, Enwonwu reacts to Eurocentric constructions that displace the significant 'Other' in the narrative and artistic representations of the era. He references paintings of masters done in the 16th century, an era of enlightenment marked by transitions from the medieval to modernity. The paintings become sites for appropriation of style and a refashioning of his female dominated portraits that are symbolic of an Afro-European identity. They manifest their hybridity characterised by cultural exchange due to a multiracial past, and contingent with the shifts of the era. Enwonwu seems to address a nostalgia evoked from unrepresented Afro-European identities, a contemporary issue that initiates discourse on the dynamics of intercultural exchanges and appropriation. In this regard, Enwonwu produces a series of visual documents with themes that are subject specific to the female gender and the roles they played as it were in early Afro-European trade encounters. The ideological intrigues embodying his experience of personal remembering remains central to the artefact as a signifier and how memory as a social phenomenon initiates cultural transmission while redefining identity over time. Thus, integral to Enwonwu's portraits are his attempts to converge and make broader the cultural resonance of an era in Afro-

European history, and, by so, engages us to experiencing mnemonics of Afro-European identities through this solo exhibition. Among Enwonwu's portraits are five notable series with sub themes namely 'Signares', 'Black and Proud' Belle of Senegal, 'Black Victoria' and 'Wanderers'. These series are symbolic portraits of identity as well as metaphors of migratory tracks which count as historical evidence of Sub Saharan African cultural history and heritage.

In the portrait series on 'Signaires' Enwonwu positions female characters in poses and adornments that are suggestive of an elite class who are privileged with a certain amount of cultural, social and economic capital in society. Their dispositions as persons of affluence are marked by a bold and confident outlook while their sense of fashion is mediated with the fashion of their European counterparts. Two of the portraits show the lateral view of the ladies with similar elitist gestural dispositions. While one captures the full body length framed below the knee, the other lady is framed just above the waistline. Both images bear a ceremonial carriage by the abundance of fabric which overflows and covers their bodies in diverse drapery shapes. Added to the elegance of these ladies is their backless dress with a wraparound that droops down across the back as a fashion to show off their back and shoulders while appealing to their feminine character. The flamboyance of their conical head-ties reinforces the hierarchy of their privileged social standing; a gesture embodied



Victoria Albis, From the Signare series, 2021, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 91.4cm

in their wealth rather than with their roles to submission as it were in certain West African cultural orientations. For the lady who is framed below the knee point, the hand fan she holds with her right hand towards her face and bare shoulders, communicates her intentions both for cooling off as well as a symbolic gesture for wealth and royalty.

The historical context associated with Enwonwu's 'Signares' series, as a subject matter, is traced from the Portuguese word 'senhora' which was used as a title in the era of the Transatlantic Trade. It described African and Afro-European women who owned property with a social hierarchy due to their 'temporary marital unions with European merchants, officials or soldiers who were resident on the Senegambian coast' (Jones). The role 'Signares' played in the economy by supplying European trade goods, slaves and gold to Europeans was definitive for the historian George Brooks who designated them as 'entrepreneurial women of means and social consequence'. However, memories of Signares either through text or images remain passive, and do not endure beyond the geopolitical and socio-historical place of origin. Only a few Senegalese authors have since scratched the surface in providing depictions of Signares in rather fictive terms to illustrate 19th century European travel accounts and 20th century novels.

On this note we come to appreciate Enwonwu's memories of these historic women of colour as a

transnational interest with a patent nationalism for individual art histories. A notion shared by late Ben Enwonwu who is remembered as Nigeria's foremost modernist artist. He asserted that Africans must be prepared to tell their own stories as a reflection of the struggle of their age, and self-actualisation (Ogbechie). An awareness that should take one beyond regionalist and ethnic politicisation to ideological spaces of interdependence within the African socio-cultural space. The consciousness of these historic shifts in identity from African to Afro-European as a shared identity among Africans sharing similar geopolitical spaces and colonial history, opens up the veracity of our existence as descendants with a common predecessor that is Afro-European. Oliver's exhibition references a certain intercultural space in history that again seems to convey a certain idea of mutual existence commensurate to John Mbiti's classical expression of the 'ubuntu'. It notes that "a person is a person through other person" or "I am because we are, since we are, therefore I am". As a recognition of our mutual hybridity, the Signares as re-authored beyond their socio-historical space thus offers a ground for mutual recognition and appreciation of both our individual and collective identities.

In considering the social aspects linking dress codes to one's identity it is also pertinent to note that the 'Signares' series in Enwonwu's portraiture appropriated European elite fashion and dress as a measure that manifested their extended hybridity. The economic advantage of the powerful elite allowed for conspicuous

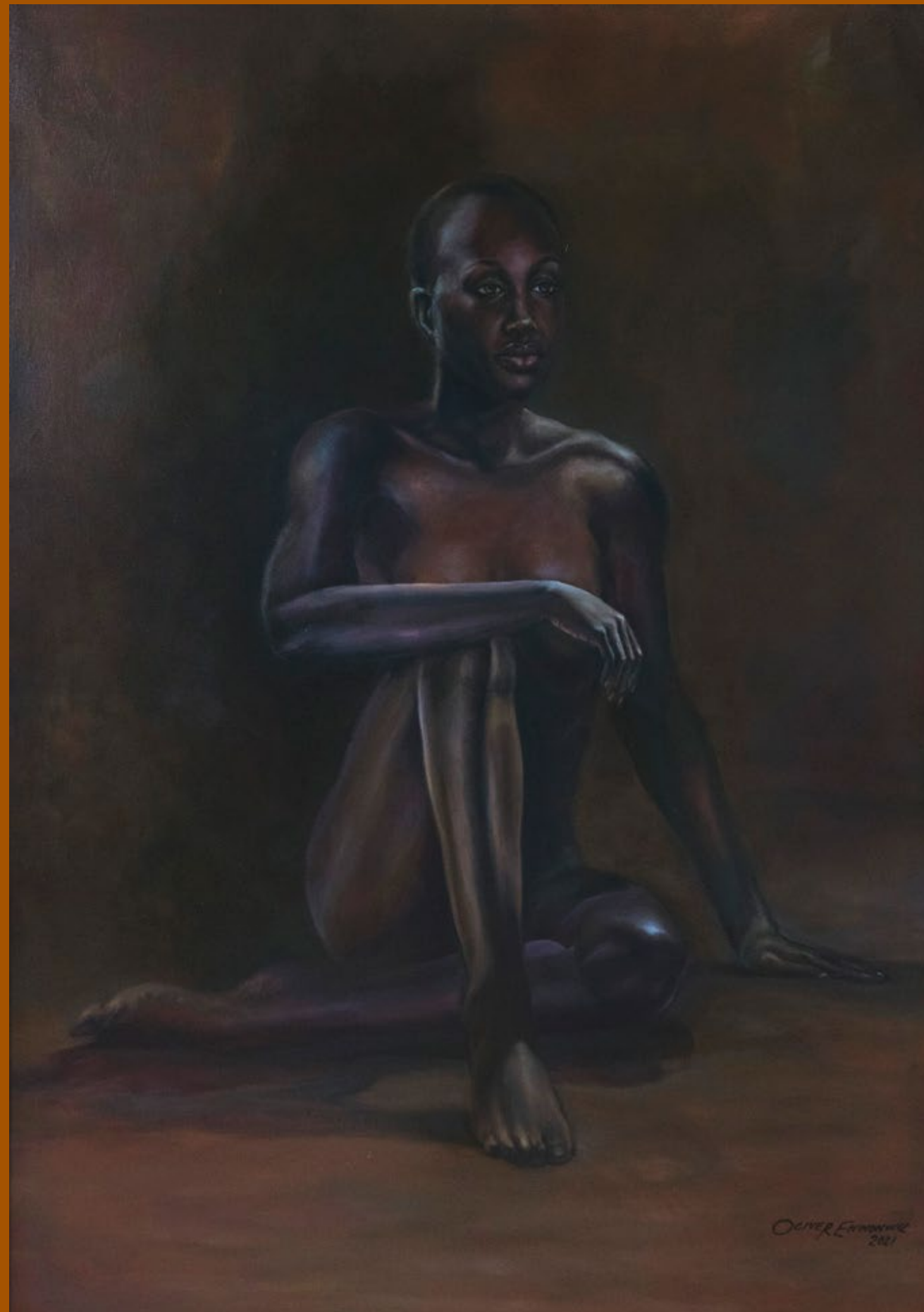


Lingeer, From the Black and Proud series, 2020, oil on canvas, 73.7 x 69.4cm

consumption of flamboyant dress exhibited in Western spaces. In this regard, dress and concomitant fashion for these Signares were ordered by emulations of Western patterns which follows George Simmel's trickle-down theory of fashion. For Simmel, he theorised that fashion in stratified societies offered the potentiality for social mobility, noting that lower status groups i.e. the working class emulated the fashions of the higher status groups. This implied that the elite innovated while the working class imitated, indicative of the modern era when Western thoughts dominated and totally displaced non-Western societies. The dress however remains a symbol of appropriated identity.

Three portraits from Enwonwu's 'Black and Proud' series provide similar notions of identity expressive of a collective ego. A phrase innate with racial discrimination and also engaged to counter historical constructions of otherness by hegemonic powers. Though the portrait subjects aren't as flamboyantly dressed as previously seen with the Signares, they represent a revolutionary movement towards Afrocentrism. A postcolonial disposition for Black empowerment with emphasis on racial identity and self-determination. Again Enwonwu composes these portraits with a sensuous air accompanied by a sense of pride to re-echo this voice against lopsided notions of colour towards the Black race.

One of the portraits showing the back view of a lady in three quarter pose is almost likened to Leonardo da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' in reverse. The lady's gesture here is pensive with her eyes closed and her body bare of all external ornamentation such as necklaces and earrings that often validate a lady's feminine appearance. She is placed against a background rendered in shades of grey that adds to the lack of lustre and surrounds her with a sense of mystery. She wears a ball-bell like short sleeve dress that covers the shoulder and arms while revealing her back on which her hair woven into a Mohawk style, drops downward in length to overlap the dress through to her mid-back. The lady's pensive disposition is rooted in self-reflexivity where she appears to assume a self-conscious awareness of the multiple spaces available to validating the essence of her personhood. A near similar disposition in a second portrait shows a lady framed at shoulder level just below the neck. Her skin is coarsely rendered in irregular tones of burnt umber and a touch of blue that glazes over her face, giving her a tense and shadowy outlook. She is placed against a background painted in tones of yellow ochre, wears a low-cut hair and without necklaces or earrings she faces onlookers with a neck twist to the right shoulder while closing her eyes. From the artistic process to the manifestation of forms that define the female portrait such as coarsely rendered, irregular tones, tense and shadowy, with a neck twist, a peculiar post-colonial identity is deduced. The semiotic dynamics of the portrait attest to an identity crises due to the psychological inheritance of a negative



Body of Power II, From the Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance series, 2021, oil on canvas, 140.5 x 96.2cm

self-image derived from a colonial past of human devaluation. However the sameness of outlook in disposition with the previous portrait, which drives home the notion of self-reflexivity and awareness is for Pierre Bourdieu the core of who we are and how we define ourselves as unique individuals. This is also for Enwonwu, a highpoint for discourse as his exhibition evokes an urgency to attend to the essential processes required in revalidating our identities within the global multiracial space.

In this exhibition, we come to experience ourselves again in the light of a history of colonial domination and its implications to our individual and collective identities. It is however seen in more objective terms, as a collision of cultures with an ambiguous force-field of competing ideologies. These competing ideologies are mediated through language systems which implicate the human person as a text that could be invented or reinvented, in a similar manner a psychological or religious counselling course would often compel a person to make adjustments. In a similar vein the artist has internalised fragments of the ambiguous language within which we all live in, with the primary purpose of bringing to memory the constructions of our existence in history and its implications in the historical present. The final consensus is that as humans living in a multiracial and multicultural space, our identities are mediated as we are in constant evolution by the quality of choices we appropriate and by which we are defined. Beyond the sophistications of the interpretive

community, we are enjoined to experience the aesthetic resonance the portraits conjure and also engage the psychological referents it heralds as mnemonic objects of identity.

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The Cult of the People, 2021, oil on canvas, 152.2 x 202.9cm

Oliver Enwonwu: Artist

Oliver Enwonwu needs no introduction to the artworld, especially in Nigeria, Britain, and the United States. An exhibiting artist for over two decades, his passion for art resonates in the aesthetic forms and aura of his subjects is evident in the oil paintings on display. Regarding his oeuvre, he states, "I see my art and painting as a calling." How do the twenty recent paintings in *Politics of Representation*, the current exhibition at the Alliance Française de Lagos, signify the artist's calling? This essay addresses that question in visual analysis and interpretations of his paintings, variably engaging history and biography. Collectively, the portraiture, figuration, and metaphorical objects and settings, dating 2020-2021, reveal that Oliver Enwonwu presents a culturally responsive vision that centers Black life in images of dignity, culture, and history through imaginative and knowledgeable perspectives.

Whether a singular painting, or one in the six different series on display—*Black and Proud*, *Body of Power*, *Belle of Senegal*, *Signare*, *Wanderer*, and *Dance of the Gods*—Enwonwu explores colour, line, and form to delineate portraits, women and fashion, spiritual ceremonies, secular events, and aspects of history with unifying visual effects. Therein resonate diverse styles and iconography of individual or imagined identities, cultural rituals, and social activities that span contemporary life and the historical entanglement of Europe, Africa, and the African Diaspora. For example, the *Signare* series illuminates the fashion and

deportment of wealthy, powerful French-Senegalese women on the islands of Gorée and Saint-Louis, off the coast of Senegal, and the entanglement of French colonialism, West African slavery, race, class, gender, sexuality, and fashion. Thematically, according to the artist, the *Signare* series explores how mixed French-African women "negotiated their identity in the 18th and 19th centuries" under French imperialism. The series intersects the *Belle of Senegal* series in the celebration of African women, though *Belle* engages the innovative hybridity of women's fashion in Senegal and its influence on global fashion.

A brief visual analysis and interpretation of one painting of the *Belle of Senegal* series widens the lens on the inspiration of Black life and contemporary fashion for the artist's work. It is an oil-on-canvas painting that depicts three beautiful Senegalese women walking together as one in a warm nebulous and seemingly windy landscape. The subdued yellow ochre colour scheme permeates and unifies the environment and the subjects in their billowing high fashion, off-shoulder boubous, elaborate sculptural headdresses, and the accentuating flared fan in the hand of the prominent central figure in the foreground. However, it is the contrasting umber and white expressive brush strokes of vertical, curvilinear, and diagonal rhythms that bring the Senegalese women and their voluminous fashion into relief and further bond their harmonious movements.

Adept renderings of the women's glamorous facial features, elegant body gestures, and bared shoulders imbue a modest sexuality and self-confidence. The subjects convey the normalcy of beauty, sensuality, class, and mobility, as they curiously gaze back at the viewer. Expressionist dabs of white paint behind the heads of the women direct special attention to their faces. Barely noticeable, a bare left foot and lower leg of the central figure appears beneath the hem of her flowing boubou. Is this a symbol of foot fetishism, or merely an index of the movement of the subject and/or the wind? Significantly, the eyes of the women stare at the viewer in a theatricality that variably appears beguiling and assertive, underscoring the women's ownership of their beauty, sexuality, and independence in the public sphere. In reflecting on this series, Enwonwu notes that it engages the fashion of contemporary women of Senegal, "chronicling their increasing hybridity that absorbs and transforms global fashion trends, yet retains the best aspects of their culture." This painting also enters a discourse on "the gaze," as the women assert their own gazes while strutting their fashion.

As exemplified in the *Signare* and *Belle of Senegal* series, Black women subjects are prominent in Enwonwu's oeuvre. Igbo masquerades of his Onitsha-Igbo family lineage (traced to Benin City, Nigeria), cultural symbols and rituals, and portraits of women and men are also prominent. Stylistically, the forms are variably naturalistic, realistic,

expressionistic, idealistic, emblematic, and symbolic. As such, his compositions span realist objective depictions (academic illusionism) and expressive exaggerations (painterly and abstract modes), evoking objective and subjective responses, respectively. Exemplary of the former are meticulously delineated mimetic portraits, and of the latter, the noted paintings of *Senegal* series. The variation underscores Enwonwu's diverse technical approaches that vary with his intent and mood.

Enwonwu notes that his *Senegal* and *Black Victoria* series respond to the art of the "Old Masters" (referring to canonical European masters dating between 14th and 19th century, as defined in Western art history). He explains, "I address the near absence of Black personages in accounts of Western art history by adapting 16th century 'Old Masters' modes of representation and techniques of painting." With particular regard for their noble subjects (kings, queens, statesmen, and so on, inclusive of symbols and allegories), Enwonwu renders mimetic representations of Black people in portraits and figuration that are imbued with dignity, royalty, piety, and respectability, among other qualities, that are often enhanced with relevant symbols and allegories. These manifestations contrast the "near absent" or minimally represented Black subjects in the art of Old Masters, largely images of slaves, servants, pets, freed Blacks, noble court figures, African rulers, ambassadors, Black Magi, musicians, and other imagined, actual, and composite

inventions, underpinned by stereotypes and preconceptions of Black inferiority, in contrast to "white" identities.

A brief discussion of the *Black and Proud* series reveals the artist's near-"natural attitude" regarding the appearance of reality in select portraits, what art historian Norman Bryson calls the "mimetic mission." Near-natural attitude is critical here, since as the artist records minute details of the subject, he deliberately paints beyond the limits of the "essential copy" to imbue meanings that defy any social void. Yet, he appreciates fidelity to the natural physiognomy, knowing that a portrait is typically commemorative, represents an actual person, or is variably an imagined, emblematic, or another presence. Whether real or imagined, his portraits are rendered in full face, head and shoulder, frontal, profile, three-quarter view, standing, seated, individual or they may be grouped, juxtaposed with objects in an interior, and/or in the public sphere, among other presences, to encode the identity and meanings of the subject.

Similarly, the clothing of subjects in Enwonwu's portraits is not merely replicated, but is endowed with meanings, symbolism, and/or allegories relative to the identity and/or specific events. Backgrounds may be minimal or variably monochromatic, infused with light to direct attention to the person depicted. He makes clear that his subjects "are not always known" to him personally, that they are "often

idealistic," and can be "completely invented or recalled from memory." *Nne*, a portrait of his mother, Mrs. Caroline Enwonwu, is among his known subjects. Mrs. Enwonwu sat for the artist, though he also used photographs that were "taken on the occasion of her 70th birthday, ten years ago." Whether the identity of the subject is real or conceptually ideal or emblematic, the mimetic elements of the portraits betray personalities with purpose. The portrait, *Ebony*, in the *Black and Proud* series, for example, epitomizes the idealism of that theme.

Ebony is a compelling head and shoulder portrait of an elegant Black woman of beauty and character who exudes self-confidence. Her body is frontal and the face is in profile, displaying meticulously modeled facial features and bone structure, smooth dark-brown skin tonalities with a luminous glow, a graceful elongated neck, and delicate shoulders. Her head and shoulders are framed in a radiant circle of diffused yellow and white light in the background that variably reflects in highlights on her face and shoulders. Her alert, observing eye, restrained facial expression, and modestly revealing shoulders betray a dignified, intelligent, personality of an elite class. This quality is punctuated in the adornment of her elegant high fashion dress, commanding cloth-sculpted headdress, and unostentatious jewelry. The warmth of the cadmium orange in the delicately folded clothing, all in place, is not only aesthetically enhancing, it signifies a pristine and orderly identity that extends far beyond fashion. The profile and radiant

atmosphere invokes Renaissance portraiture. It is as if the artist's earthly idealism of this Black woman enters the realm of spirituality. Whether earthly, spiritual or both, the representation betrays the visuality of Enwonwu's belief that fashion celebrates people, their elegance, aspirations, and feelings of confidence.

Three other paintings of the *Black and Proud* series are on display. Two are portraits of elegantly fashioned Black women of different ages, one wearing an elaborate headdress and the other donning an intricate, braided hairstyle, each appearing as confident personalities. Distinctively, the fourth portrait appears to be either a young female or young male, given its gender ambiguity. The portrait is modeled in radiant indigo tonalities, warm illumination, and highlights, set against a complementary yellow orange background that is partially luminous. The head is gently tilted with closed eyes, soft flesh, pursed lips, and a calm facial expression evocative of deep introspection. If the *Black and Proud* theme is taken literally, this portrait, like *Ebony*, epitomizes that ideal.

Enwonwu has referred to his regal Black figures as "Images of Resistance," invoking his resistant conversation with European Masters. Considering the historical agency of Black artists and Black people, globally, who continuously advance self-determination in all aspects of life, Enwonwu's portraits interpenetrates the visions of African American artists of the United States, African Diaspora, Nigeria, and elsewhere. For

example, though the likenesses of his subjects are ideals, they are kin to the realism of African American artist, Charles White (1918-1979). White created "images of dignity" for ordinary people, and he spoke against distorted stereotypes and history of African American during the Chicago Black Renaissance (that began in the 1930s) and throughout his life. He was convinced that art spoke and fought wars against neglect, stereotypes, and racial inequities, and he entered that war, reiterating, "Paint is the only weapon I have with which to fight what I resent." Though continents, decades, and cultural identities apart, White and Enwonwu, however much they resisted absence or stereotype, most importantly, through their own self-knowing agency, they entered Black people into an image world of humanity with their own truths, like millions of other Black artists globally.

The variation in Enwonwu's subjects speaks to his deep interest in humanity and the rituals of life across time and geographical regions. *The Wanderer* series expands the subjects in this display from populations in Senegal and Nigeria to the nomadic Tuareg people of the Sahara Desert and the Sahel of West Africa. Individual close-up frontal portraits represent two Tuareg subjects, an elderly and a younger man of distinct personalities, status, and dress. Their heads are clothed in monochromatic indigo Tagelmust (turban and veil) and their bodies are fully clothed in matching traditional indigo robes that are protective in harsh dry climates. Delineated in sensitive modeling,

painterly gestures imbued with light, and definitive lines and colour in their faces and clothing, the subjects are prominent against their monochromatic backgrounds; warm subdued sienna tones of the elder and cool blue tints, accentuated with white painterly brushstrokes, of the younger. Both subjects appear emblematic of self-assured Tuareg masculinity—an elderly aura of wisdom and a youthful virility, respectively. They are not portraits of specific people, but created in imagination and cultural knowledge.

Enwonwu briefly addresses the character, lifestyle, and image of the Tuareg people, directing attention to the symbolism depicted in his paintings in the "network of lines strewn across the almost corrugated faces of the Tuaregs...evidence of their far-flung travels that dissolve boundaries and conflate notions of time and space." He adds, "The lines are also a metaphor for their migratory experiences along trodden paths, and more importantly, the history of trade relations between Africa and Europe." The piercing eyes of each man radiate an assertive agency beneath the Tagelmust, as if confronting an invasive spectator. The portraits, like others on display, betray warm and cool tonalities and intimate details of the subjects' faces (where shown), ages, expressions, authoritative personalities and dress, underscoring the artist's interest in a diversified humanity, and in traditional and contemporary fashion, as an index of personal, social, and class identity.

It is not surprising that within this body of work, Enwonwu presents a portrait of his mother, Mrs. Caroline Enwonwu. The title is *Nne*. Unlike the emblematic Tuareg portraits, *Nne* represents an actual identity. Like the *Black and Proud* portraits and others, the painting is imbued with women's respectability and authority. Though the term, "*Nne*," in the Igbo language refers to mothers, its meanings include or signify, as Kenneth Ubani observes, "...name, status and many other attributes such as respect, love, togetherness, relationship and other appellation." Those meanings are sustained in the strong bonds between the artist and his mother, and they resonate in the aura in the portrait. Mrs. Enwonwu is consciously posing as she sits in a chair, presumably in an interior, though unidentifiable. She is fashionably dressed in rich clothing, including a shawl draped over her left shoulder, and an accentuating light yellow puff-sleeved blouse. She slightly touches her purse in her lap. Wearing two precious necklaces, one a long strand of purple beads and small earrings, her forehead is prominent with a luminous glow, and her prestigious subtle ringed necks is in harmony with the beads. All contribute to the focus on her face and head, as less attention is given to the body. What is most striking in *Nne*'s composure are her attractive eyes and their intense gaze at the viewer. It is a powerful gaze of authority, full of command, as her eyes and lips, at the same time convey status, responsibility, and a knowingly feminine sensibility. The artist captures in his rendering of this dignified personality, the look of the love of his mother for her son.

Like *Nne*, the final paintings of the exhibition to be discussed in this essay were inspired by family and Onitsha-Igbo culture and history. Onitsha-Igbo traditions, like modern and contemporary life, Catholicism, education, business, and so on, are critical aspects of Enwonwu family values. The paintings, *Cult of the People* and *Spirit in Flight* in some ways are meditations on the family's immersion in Onitsha-Igbo culture and society. *Ronke*, however, extends the conversation to Yoruba kinship through extended family relations and the painting of her aunt, Princess Adetutu Ademiluyi, the subject of three *Tutu* portraits by the late master painter and sculptor Ben Enwonwu, the father of Oliver Enwonwu. Two of the portraits have disappeared.

Ronke Ademiluyi, the great grand-daughter of the royal family of Ooni Ajagun Ademiluyi of Ile-Ife, is a Yoruba princess, born in London. A well-known promoter of African fashion and emerging fashion designers, she founded Africa Fashion Week Nigeria and Africa Fashion Week London. Among other developments, she works with the current Ooni of Ife through the Queen Moremi initiative to promote leadership and related programmes for young women. Princess Ronke is the subject of two of Oliver Enwonwu's paintings in this exhibition, one of which includes one of the two missing *Tutu* masterpieces.

The painting, *Ronke*, is a portrait of the modern princess and promoter of modern fashion.

The subject has a monumental presence in a comfortable interior with elegant furniture, porcelain decorum, and a painting on the back wall, all carefully arranged in an atmosphere of muted tones. She sits isolated, yet confidently, in a three-quarter view, her body loosely covered in a red dress that drapes to the floor, as one hand gently touches her knee, and her head turns away from the scene with a directional look beyond the picture frame. In scale, foreground, and detail, including serious expression and braided hairstyle, Ronke's presence is commanding. The warm yellow glow behind her head is accentuating, and the light reflects in her carefully delineated facial expression of deep concern. Yet, this is actually a scene of two portraits. The painting on the wall is the world-renowned masterpiece portrait, *Tutu*, that has been missing from the home of Ben Enwonwu in Ikoyi, Lagos since 1994, shortly after his death. With emphasis, the lines of the floor lead back to the painting in linear perspective. However diminutive in scale, the painting appears authentic and commands attention. It is known that Princess Ronke has been searching for her aunt, and that many are still searching for, or at least still questioning the whereabouts of this *Tutu* painting and one other. (The third one, lost for decades, was found, and auctioned by Bonhams in 2018 for \$1.67 million.) Given the encoded history of *Ronke*, the painting might be regarded as a double portrait and a history painting. Enwonwu considers the portrait an "intergenerational dialogue." That characterization can easily apply to *The Cult of the People* and *Dance of the Gods*.

The Cult of the People depicts an outdoor ritual scene of the *Otu Odu* Society, also known as the Ivory Society, since its members have a right to wear ivory. *Ajie* Iyom Nweze Enwonwu, Oliver Enwonwu's paternal grandmother, belonged to the prestigious Society. She was a successful landowner and textile businesswoman, who "possessed a strong will and an aggressive imposing presence," according to art historians Sylvester Ogbechie and Nkiru Nzegwu. However, wealth, assertion, and business success are not enough to become a member of the Society. Historian Gloria Chuku makes clear that members must be of good character, morality, success, and respectability, which are expected of all members of women's titled societies.

The subjects in the painting, *The Cult of the People*, are ten members of the *Otu Odu* Society performing a sacred ritual in an open landscape. Their individual dance rhythms are sustained in harmonious order in a V-shape that recedes in linear perspective from the dominant central figure in the foreground. All are in ritual white dress of the *Otu Odu* Society: flowing white wrappers with matching elegant headdresses, elephant tusks jewelry encasing their legs, and ivory bracelets. The light and shadow in the monochromatic blue and purple tints of their dress reflect the tonalities of the cool blue sky and clouds above their heads, as their sienna brown skin tones connect to their earthly domain beneath their bare feet. However, as the women toss their heads with calm facial expressions and closed

eyes in gestures of spiritual ecstasy, they are suspended in a transcendent aura of ancestral and earthly realms. The viewer sees the women dance in graceful gestures, their ritual clothing moving in rhythmic folds, angles, and colours in harmony with their demure spiritual invocations and environment. What may not be obvious is their unified social identity and authoritative social power that are symbolized by their ritual dress and jewelry. This is an expressive figurative painting, not an illustration. Its form and iconography, however, encodes aspects of culture and history.

An individual photograph, owned by the Ben Enwonwu family, captures an image of Oliver Enwonwu's grandmother, *Ajie* Iyom Nweze Enwonwu. She is seated in frontal composure, dressed in her *Otu Odu* Society ceremonial regalia of white cloth, ivory necklace, bracelet, and anklets. This history and cultural knowledge inspired Enwonwu. Whether or not he actually saw a sacred *Otu Odu* ritual, he definitely saw this photograph in his parent's home.

Perhaps the most dynamic painting on exhibit is Enwonwu's *Spirit in Flight*. The subject, an Onitsha-Igbo *Agbogho Mmuo* (*Maiden Spirit*), is depicted in a dynamic ceremonial performance, symbolically levitating in spiritual realms. The decorative costumed torso, legs, and arms are sharply angled in a spiritual vitality, as if parting the surrounding thunderous clouds. The monumental superstructure decorated with colourful feathers, patterns, and textures

moves in harmony with the lithe movements of the performer. Dynamic and graceful feminine movement, pointed feet, gesturing fan, and calm white mask, painted with delicate black lines and shapes, symbolically bind ancestral and virginal purity. Ceremonially, *Agbogho Mmuo* symbolizes Igbo principles of honouring ancestors, motherhood, virginal purity of young maidens, and linking the fertility of the soil and humanity. They appear in rituals to honour ancestors during planting season, after a harvest, and during funeral ceremonies of important persons, among others, including to variably “rectify breaches of accepted social and spiritual conduct.”

Enwonwu credits his Onitsha-Igbo paintings to the transition of his father, who with Aina Onabolu, Akinola Lasekan, and few others, spearheaded modern art in Nigeria, Enwonwu himself becoming the most renown among them in the 1950s. Enwonwu states, “In tribute to my father, an incursion into the metaphysical is marked by my series based on contemporary interpretation of traditional African dance and the Onitsha-Igbo masquerade pantheon, *Mmonwu*.” This is not surprising, since *Agbogho Mmuo* was the most prominent masquerader in his father’s oeuvre over decades, many appearing in his *Africa Dances* series. *Ogolo*, which impressed the elder Enwonwu during the funeral of his older brother, *Ike Francis Enwonwu*, became a primary subject in his final years. The son’s *Agbogho Mmuo* in *Spirit in Flight* dances in the history of his father’s *Agbogho Mmuo* with honour and independence. It is a manifestation

of influence that began as the son observed the father working in his studio and began his own drawings. It was further sparked by his father’s response to his drawings when he was about seven years old, as he called out to the mother, “Oliver draws with mathematical precision.”

This painting and the larger body of work by O. Enwonwu on display, in form and iconography, constitute a dynamic nod to his father, to Onitsha-Igbo culture, family values, Black pride, Black self-definition, Black self-determination, and a nod to the world as an artist, underscoring Enwonwu’s deep concern for humanity. That concern resonates in his multiple professional positions as an institution builder. Though art and painting, as Oliver Enwonwu states, is his calling, he has demonstrated that art indeed is his calling, but his calling also extends far beyond art.

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1. “Artists Spotlight: Oliver Enwonwu: Healing our Humanity: Finding Hope, Love, and Unity,” Interview with Lilly McFachern, June 2, 2021; Group Exhibition, Stephan Thomas Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFneezzajV4> accessed August 24, 2021.

2. Oliver Enwonwu, email to Freida High, February 4, 2021.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Thomas T. F. Earle and Kate J. P. Lowe, eds., *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Joaneath Spicer, ed. *Revealing The African Presence in Renaissance Europe* (Baltimore: Walters Art Museum, 2013).

6. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: New University Press, 1983).

7. Enwonwu, email to High, February 4, 2021.

8. Enwonwu, email to High, August 31, 2021.

9. Artist Spotlight: Oliver Enwonwu, video Interview with Lilly McFachern.

10. Sarah Kelly Gehler, “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow: Charles White’s Murals And History As Art,” in *Charles White: A Retrospective*, ed. Sarah Kelly Oehler and Esther Adler (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 25; Freida High Wasikhongo Tesfagiorgis, “Painting History and Protest: Black Lives Matter Murals in Madison, Wisconsin 2020,” in *Let’s Talk About It: The Art, The Artists and the Racial Justice Movement on Madison’s State Street*, ed. Adam Schragger (Madison, WI: American Family Mutual Insurance Institute for Corporate and Social Impact, 2020), 3.

11. “Oliver Enwonwu: About,” <https://www.oliverenwonwu.com/about/>, accessed September 2, 2021.

12. Kenneth Ubani, “The Concept of ‘Nne’ in the Igbo World View as is Expatiated in Igbo Women August,” *Canadian Social Science* 14, 11 (2018): 24.

13. Though it appears to have been concluded that Ben Enwonwu was born in 1917, I maintain my view that it was 1918, as I will argue in a future publication.

14. “Princess Ademiluyi Ronke,” Creative Media Platform, <https://creativewomen.co/staff/princess-ademiluyi-ronke/>, accessed September 6, 2021.

15. Enwonwu, email to High, August 31, 2021.

16. Sylvester Ogbechie, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008), 24; Nkiru Nzegwu, “Representation Axis: The Cultural Realignment of Ben Enwonwu,” in *Contemporary Textures: Multidimensionality in Nigerian Art*, ed. Nkiru Nzegwu (Binghamton: International Society for the Study of Africa,

1993), 170.

17. Gloria Chuku, “Igbo Women and Political Participation,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 42,1 (2009): 85; Gloria Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900-1960* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 23.

18. Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1984), 111–130.

19. Ben Enwonwu achieved global attention as he earned awards, attracted publicity, and exhibited in Nigeria, Britain, and the United States in the 1940s and 1950. His global stature reached unprecedented heights with his commission to sculpt the Portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, and its exhibition at the 227th Exhibition of the Royal Society of British Artists in 1957 and at the Tate Gallery in 1958.

20. Enwonwu, email to High, February 4, 2021.

21. Ogbechie, 198.

22. Enwonwu, email to High, February 4, 2021.

23. Oliver Enwonwu assumes multiple professional positions: Executive Director of the Ben Enwonwu Foundation, Founder-Director of Omenka Gallery, President of the Society of Nigerian Artists, CEO of Revilo Company—publisher of Omenka Magazine, Chairman of the Visual Arts Sub-Committee of the Post-COVID-19 Initiative for the Creative Industry. In addition, this institution builder curates, mentors, and supports young artists. In an email dated January 31, 2021, I asked the artist, “How is this multi-tasking interrelated?” He responded on February 4, 2021, “While these platforms and experiences may seem diverse, they are connected by the singular purpose of ensuring increased global visibility and appreciation for African art.” Enwonwu’s voice and art intersects those of Black artists globally who are committed to making our voices heard and our art visible and preserved on all counts. The artist lives in the institution builder, and the institution builder lives in the artist.

Oliver Enwonwu in Conversation with Sabo Kpade



Nne, 2021, oil on canvas, 145 x 122.4cm

Why the abiding interest in portraiture?

Portraiture features strongly in my work. It is a response to the near total exclusion of black people in the Western historical canon of art. When we were featured, we were depicted mostly as slaves. I try to celebrate what is good about Africa. Even when my subjects are ordinary people, I put them in stately fashion using the same tools and the same style of working that Europeans historically used to turn “the gaze” on us. So that's why I engage portraiture and why you see that the background is “classical”, poses are “classical”, and the figures elevated; they're strong, proud and regal.

Featureless is a terrible description for the background in this body of work because there are washes of colour. Any specific reason why you have removed period details? Is it to eliminate distractions?

I like the fact that you can transport my sitters to different periods. It's an important point you have raised. I try to make my work transcend time and devoid of location so they can sit within any geographical space. I want the focus to be on the sitter's dignity. Without the background competing, their features stand out. Their sense of pride and confidence stands out. The gaze, even when averted, is strong. It is no longer lowered.

There's something you do that I enjoy thoroughly and that is how well you paint the costumes on the figures. It is clear that they are expensive.

I'm very interested in clothes and fabric and the way they fall on the figure. In Africa, fabric is extremely important and tells a story. I'm very interested in how its volume changes especially when there is movement but even when the figures are static as one can still feel a sense of rhythm.

The fabrics in your works are typically soft, often luxurious and almost always indulgently painted. Is this a fair assessment?

Yes, it is. I'm able to depict cotton, silk and light voile in my paintings to highlight the status of my sitters. Textures have always been important to me. In the European tradition, the Dutch were masters at depicting textures and rendering the likeness of an object. You can feel the realness, it's palpable. They knew how to paint silk and even metal. That was the height of the skill in those days.

For the uninformed who walks into your exhibition—'Politics of Representation' presented by SMO Contemporary—to view the works on display, how would you describe the architecture of light and colour in your compositions?

My technique is painstaking because I paint in the classical tradition. It is important to me to reappropriate the tools the West used to depict us in poor light, to champion my cause in celebrating black excellence. I begin with an underpainting to map out the areas of light and shade, being careful to allow the already prepared brilliant white of the canvas or ground to shine through. I then block in the colour in several transparent layers. Working from dark to light, the shadows are painted thinly, while the middle areas and highlights progressively thicker. The latter are left for the very last. It's a slow build up.

It seems indulgent in the best sense. There's the richness of the colours and folds of the fabric. They are not competing with the lustre on the skin of the figures but this contrast brings my attention to how well you paint brown skin. Do you paint from real life or from secondary sources like photographs?

Most of the time, I have live models sit for me but I have also completed their portraits from photographs taken of them. Sometimes, I reference historical photographs to be accurate with regards to clothing and accessories. Significantly, my focus is not in being faithful to their likeness except it is a commissioned portrait. I am more interested in rendering their anatomy accurately or in the way light falls on their bodies and apparel. In such cases, I allow my creativity lose in depicting an idealised representation of the sitter. For instance, I modify

certain facial features, or slightly elongate necks and limbs. Indeed, my sitter could be an actual person or an imaginary figure.

So real likeness isn't the goal. You paint beautiful people, some with long elegant necks. They're idealised but are not a false idealisation.

I like the way you put it.

The colour tones you use are muted in most cases. Is it that you find brilliance in dark, muted colours?

Because I like that the dark muted colours draw you in. There's a sense of mystery as opposed to when they're too vibrant, where you see everything at a glance. I want people to keep appreciating a painting as the more you look, the more things you should see. A good painting literally unfolds before you as time goes on.

Did you not want to focus more on hair, if you've focused this much on skin and costumes?

That's a very good question. Hair like you rightly pointed out is extremely important. It is just as significant to me as a woman's apparel, skin and form. These are elements that I think are inextricably linked to a woman, they tell a story especially when expressing her grace and



Ali, From the Wanderer series 2020, oil on canvas, 77 x 59cm



Musa, From the Wanderer series 2020, oil on canvas, 61 x 50.5cm

poise—her very essence.

The only two male figures in this body of work are from the 'Wanderer Series' 2020 and modelled on your former security guard called Ali. Why was he an interesting subject for you?

Ali was a seasonal worker because he stayed for short periods and then went up north to farm. But each time, he would leave someone behind to stand in temporarily for him. He lives a nomadic life, much like the Tuaregs. My interest in him was first captured in preliminary sketches. Later on, I would work from photographs when he was away. As time went on, I began to remodel his features, to create new characters. Whenever Ali returned, he always looked remarkably different. I recall vividly that when he had his first son, he looked much older and weathered. So it's been a mixed match of several portraits of Ali with evolving features and of completely new characters. These migratory experiences evident in the lines and beaten tracks strewn across his face have always been of great interest to me.

Do you remember how long he was away for?

Probably for about seven or eight years until we grew tired. Though Ali was quite close to the family and I, we felt he was a security risk because he was unstable. Each stint away brought with it a different replacement. Too

many people were getting familiar with the property and we grew uncomfortable with the arrangement.

Ali was your gate man but in the painting he is elevated to nobility. Do you see that as a primary job, to elevate people?

Absolutely. The best way to fight institutional racism or racism in any form is to celebrate black excellence because excellence itself speaks to the fact that we want to be judged not by the colour of our eyes, texture of our hair or our complexion, but by our merits and accomplishments.

The gaze of the figures is direct, intense and unflinching. Are you hoping for a more immediate or intimate relationship with the viewer?

For me, it captures the essence of what I'm trying to do, which is to depict our people as confident. We're not exotic as some stereotypes promote, we're people who have something to contribute to the world. Civilisation started in Africa, unfortunately, our development was truncated by such phenomena as slavery and colonialism. Through the strong gaze and the regality of my sitters, I elevate black people all over the world.

In today's national politics, depending on where you get your news from, this figure is a Fulani herdsman who is at the centre of the national debate on whether or not to allow open grazing and state sovereignty. Do you concern yourself with this level of contemporary national politics?

I think today's politics will become tomorrow's history. As an artist I'm all about documenting history and this exhibition engages historical, social and political events that have shaped our identity. It's about the politics of representation. In this vein, the paintings are not concerned with the migratory experiences of the Tuaregs and not open grazing and state sovereignty.

Maybe in a sequel to this exhibition, I might tackle such contemporary happenings but at the moment, this is where I am.

way of initiating a generational dialogue; while I'm the artist's son, she is a niece of the famous Tutu. Ronke sat for me in the white space of my gallery, Omenka. However, in both portraits, I relocated her. In the second particularly, I have placed her in opulence, sitting her on a stately chair and inserting my father's portrait of Tutu, her aunt on the wall at the top left corner. This context lends to my quest to celebrate accomplished African women.

There's a lot of meta-play at hand. And, it is a huge legacy you're going up against, even when the intention is to be complementary or commemorative. Can you steer clear of a comparison of artistic prowess even when the intention is to be salutary?

That's a very good question. For me it was all about connecting through dialogue and celebrating black excellence. And this dialogue doesn't have to capture the exactness of 'Tutu' as long as it is recognisable and people can immediately draw a link between the portrait and Ronke. This is the essence. Any time I sit down to work, it is not necessarily about capturing a likeness, it is about capturing the spirit and emotions. There's a question there about how we're forming our identities as a people.

In the series on Signares, the figures are slim, pretty and elegantly dressed. What is the historical context here?

The same figure appears in two works — 'Ronke' and 'Ronke II'. Who is this figure and why is it important that she is the subject of two paintings?

The figure is Ronke Ademiluyi. She's a princess from the royal family of Ile-Ife in Osun State and a well-known figure in the Nigerian fashion industry. Her great grandfather was the 48th Ooni of Ife. Incidentally, her aunty Adetutu was the subject of a very important series of paintings by my late father; he called it 'Tutu'. I remember when one iteration of 'Tutu' sold for \$1.6 million, Ronke, a good friend and I, had a conversation about painting her portrait as a



Ronke II, 2021, oil on canvas, 149.5 x 100cm



Victoria Albis, From the Signare series, 2021, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 91.4cm



Dakar Rhythm II, From the Belle of Senegal series, 2021, oil on canvas, 199 x 138.5cm

The Signares is a name given to the political class of women in 17th-century Senegambia who were extremely influential. They married mainly French sailors, were wealthy and well dressed. Through this series, I argue that women from the earliest times have held a strong place in African society.

Is there a specific reason why you tripled the number of figures in the painting of the Signare to 3 in 'Belle of Senegal' (2021)?

It is to triple the visual impact. In addition to the increased number, the painting is significantly larger. This makes it monumental in size and the rhythm more visible. Even when the women are not dancing, one can feel a sense of rhythm when they're walking or stationary, just posing. One can tell at once that they are supremely confident.

Why the fascination with Senegalese culture and, let's say, Senegalese women?

My fascination with Senegal is that it is one of the most iconic places for culture in Africa, judging also by great people like Leopold Senghor who espoused the Negritude philosophy along with two of his colleagues. It sought to emancipate the Blackman by arguing that we should be judged by our achievements and not the colour of our skin. My father also completed series of paintings over three or four decades

that strongly supported this idea. I love how the Senegalese have been able to project their culture through various events like the *Dakar Biennial*. I love how the women celebrate their indigenous fashion; they stay true to their roots. I love the volume of their boubous and how elegant they look. I also love their dark, velvety skin and their sense of enterprise.

Sabo Kpade

Art Critic

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.



OLIVER ENWONWU

EDUCATION

- 2015-present** Ph.D., African Art History, University of Benin
2012 M.A, Visual Arts (art history, best graduating student), University of Lagos
2011 Introduction to Curating Contemporary Art Exhibitions Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts, London
2006-2007 PGD, Visual Art (distinction, best graduating student), University of Lagos
2002-2003 PGD, Applied Geophysics (best graduating student), University of Lagos
2001-2002 Advanced Diploma (distinction) Exploration Geophysics, University of Lagos
1992-1999 BSc, Biochemistry, University of Lagos

Area of specialisation: African Art History

SELECT CURATORIAL PROJECTS

- 2018 The Next Frontiers: Building Tomorrow's Masterpieces, FREIA, Civic Centre, Lagos
2017 Raqib Bashorun: Realm of Freedom, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2016 Akintunde Akinleye: Delta Bush Refineries and Other Stories, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2016 Mythopoeia: Recent Paintings by Moyo Ogundipe, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2016 Joel Mpah Dooh: Time to Meet, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2015-2016 Yinka Ilori and Jade Folawiyo: Status and Time, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2015 ruby amanze and Wura-Natasha Ogunji: Magic, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2014 Uche James-Iroha: Power and Powers, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2013 Having Travelled Far, featuring German-based African artists; Owusu-Ankomah, Godfried Donkor, Manuela Sambo, EL Loko, and Ransome Stanley
2013 'Okhai Ojeikere and Gary Stephens: Networks and Voids, Modern Interpretations of Nigerian Hairstyles and Headdresses, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2013 Cedric Nunn: Call and Response, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2012 Gary Stephens: Ankara Portraits, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2011 Abass Kelani: Man & Machine, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2010 Reconstruction in Reverse, Deconstructing the Displaced and Misinterpreted Nigerian Identity
2009 A Perspective on Contemporary Nigerian Photography, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2008 Ben Enwonwu: Life and Times, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
2004 Ben Enwonwu: Celebration of Excellence, Royal Commonwealth Society, UK
(Full list to be provided on request)

INVITATIONALS, SOLO AND GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Solo

- 2007 'Black Rhythm', Waterside Hotel, Dublin, Ireland
- 2006 'Afro Decor Show', Dublin, Ireland
- 1999 'Africa Dances; An introductory Exhibition', Lola Art Gallery, Victoria Island, Lagos

Group

- 2021 'Healing our Humanity, Finding Hope, Love and Unity', Steffen Thomas Museum, Atlanta
- 2020 - 2021 'AfroSoul': A CADA Contemporary African Diaspora Art Exhibition
- 2009 'Dialogue Between Cultures: An exhibition of paintings, sculptures and photographs to mark 50 years of cultural relations between France and Nigeria', National Museum, Lagos
- 2009 'Artfair 2009', Framemaster Art Gallery, Lagos
- 2009 'October Rain 11th Annual Juried Exhibition', SNA Lagos State Chapter, National Museum, Lagos
- 2009 'Art Expo 2009', Collaboration between the National Gallery of Art and Art Galleries Association of Nigeria, National Museum, Lagos
- 2009 'Open House; An Exhibition of Contemporary Nigerian Art', Visual Art Society of Nigeria, Mydrim Gallery, Lagos
- 2008 'October Rain, 10th Annual Juried Exhibition', SNA Lagos State Chapter, National Museum, Lagos
- 2006 'Artfair 2006', Framemaster Art Gallery, Lagos
- 2006 'The Celebration of Excellence', Ekpiken Hall, Calabar
- 2005 'Continuing Heritage', Royal Commonwealth Society, London, UK
- 2005 'Portraits, Landscapes and the Book', Royal Commonwealth Society, London, UK
- 2004 'Black Culture', Collaboration between the National Commission for Museum & Monuments (NCMM), Lagos and the United States Consulate-General, Lagos, National Museum, Lagos
- 2003 'Olokoto (A circle of Onitsha - Ado artists) Premiere Exhibition', Pendulum Art Gallery, Lekki, Lagos
- 1999 'Heritage 99', French Cultural Centre, Ikoyi, Lagos

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2013-present Founder/Editor-in-Chief, Omenka Magazine, Lagos

- Established Omenka magazine as the premium publication on art, business and luxury-lifestyle in Africa
- Defining the overall strategic direction and content for the magazine

- Managing an experienced team of specialist editorial, marketing and PR and design consultants
- Defining and implementing strategies (business and development, marketing and distribution)
- Increase media attention and audience engagement for exhibitions and events
- Established media partnerships with such global cultural events as 1:54 Contemporary Art Fair, London, Lagos Theatre Festival, IREPRESENT Film Festival, Cape Town Art Fair, Art Dubai, Video Brasil, Joburg Art Fair, LagosPhoto Festival, Lagos Book and Art Festival, Nollywood Week Paris and Design Indaba

2008-present Founder, Chief Executive Officer, Revilo Company Ltd, Lagos

- Day-to-day running and administration
- Managing an experienced team of specialist editorial, marketing and PR, and design consultants
- Designing and implementing business, marketing and distribution strategies
- Increase media attention and PR for exhibitions and events

2003-present Founder and Executive Director/Trustee, The Ben Enwonwu Foundation, Lagos

- In collaboration with the Society of Nigerian Artists and supported by Alliance Française /Mike Adenuga Centre Lagos, established 'Point of View' (POV), a monthly series of interdisciplinary talks interrogating the evolving role of the visual arts in addressing major issues affecting Africa and the rest of the world. Significantly, the fourth edition titled 'Art as a Driver for Environmental Sustainability' advocated for sustainable cities and communities by promoting interdisciplinary collaborations between professionals across such diverse sectors as government, the arts, science and technology, to highlight the significant role of the visual arts in ensuring policy frameworks that address climate change
- Partnered with Alliance Française Lagos/Mike Adenuga Centre on The Lagos Creative Project, a residency open to artists of African and French descent and established to foster cross-cultural ties and international exchange between African countries and France
- Led a small team supported by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Bonhams and the British Deputy High Commission in Lagos to loan, transport and exhibit the sculpture of HM Queen Elizabeth II for the occasion of the official visit of HRH Prince Charles
- Curated the seminal exhibition Celebration of Excellence to mark the 10th anniversary of Enwonwu's passing, at the Royal Commonwealth Society, London. Opened by Princess Alexandra of Kent and the Mayor of London, the 55 works on display were valued and insured for an unprecedented amount of N100,000,000.00.
- Developed educational-based initiatives including The Ben Enwonwu Foundation Young Artist of the Year (BEFYART) and a scholarship scheme Building and maintaining relationships with major local and international auction houses, publishing houses on issues surrounding authenticity and copyright like Sotheby's, Christies, Bonhams and PIASA

- Maintaining archives, which include photographs, film, manuscripts, personal belongings and tools of trade
- Researching on exhibitions and publications
- Fundraising and organising all Foundation events including seminars/talks and the annual Distinguished Ben Enwonwu Lecture Series. Previous speakers include HE, Prof. Yemi Osinbajo Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr Christopher Kolade, former Nigerian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, Nobel Laureate Prof. Wole Soyinka, and Mr Donald Duke, former Executive Governor of Cross Rivers State.
- Sustaining and developing relationships with partners and funder organisations including The Prince Claus Fund and the Warren Robbins Library of the Smithsonian Institute for the donation of book publications and academic journals
- Preparing presentations and speaking at art seminars and forums that project the work of the Foundation and promote the artist's legacy
- Developing robust programmes of exhibitions and talks
- Researching and contributing critical essays on artists/exhibitions
- Writing technical reports (condition and authentication)

2003-present Founder and Director, Omenka Gallery, Lagos

- Achieved rating of the gallery on the list of the 500 of the Best Galleries Worldwide by BLOUIN ARTINFO, top ten in Africa by Culture Trip and West Africa's 10 Best Contemporary Art Galleries by CP Africa
- Led Omenka as the first indigenous gallery to participate in major international art fairs across four continents including The Armory Show, New York; Art Dubai, UAE; the Joburg Art Fair; Cape Town Art Fair; Cologne Paper Art; LOOP, Barcelona; Art 15, London and 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, London
- Established cross-collaboration with other major galleries across the world to bring for the first time many international artists to Nigeria including Angelo Bellobono, Kimathi Donkor and Owusu-Ankomah
- Maintenance/repair carried out on the Wind Sculpture VI by Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA) at the Ndubuisi Kanu Park, Ikeja, Lagos, organised by the British Council
- Researched and documented the collections of The Nigerian Stock Exchange, Access Bank, Olaniwun Ajayi LP, Mfon Usoro, and Omooba Yemisi Shyllon (works by Lamidi Fakeye)
- Developing robust programmes of original exhibitions and talks that expand the canon and provoke discourse around contemporary art developments in Africa. Significantly, to address the underrepresentation of women in narratives of art in Nigeria, the gallery has represented,

as well as exhibited at major global art fairs, work by emerging and established female artists including Nnenna Okore, Naidi Emeziele, Nathalie Mba Bikoro, ruby amanze, Wura-Natasha Ogunji, and Dr Naluwembe Binaisa

- Researching and contributing critical essays on artists/exhibitions
- Building strategic business relationships and consulting for significant galleries, auction houses, museums and cultural institutions
- Building and cultivating strong networks with prominent collectors and patrons, professional colleagues, partner institutions including museums and galleries, as well as communities in Africa
- Drawing up and overseeing comprehensive collections management programmes
- Drawing up and managing policies including acquisition and disposal, safeguarding, and care of the collection
- Providing art advisory for finance including periodic inspection and evaluation of artwork for lending purposes
- Writing appraisal reports of artworks/collections (insurance replacement value, fair market value for liquidation and collateral evaluation)
- Writing industry reports and due diligence including artist reports and market and sector mapping
- Providing training and professional development on general art appreciation, history of modern Nigerian art, care and storage of artworks, as well as basic guidelines for viewing and display

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES / SERVICE

2020-present Chairman, Visual Arts Sub-Committee of the Post-COVID-19 Initiative for the Creative Industry

- Designing implementation strategies to disburse COVID-19 relief funds and facilities
- Establishing policy frameworks for tax relief
- Identifying steps for the implementation of long-term intervention plans for the overall development of the creative industry in Nigeria

2020-present Member, Covid-19 Pandemic Review Committee, Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Lagos State

- Critically assessing and reviewing the impact of the pandemic on the sectors

2020-present Member, Committee on Post-COVID-19 Initiatives for the Creative Industry

- Assessing the expected impact of the pandemic on the industry in general
- Advising the Federal Government on mitigating job and revenue losses in the sector, as well

- creating succour for small businesses in the industry
- Suggesting taxation and financing best suited to the industry

2020-present Member, Advisory Board, Arts in Medicine Project

- Establishing policies and advising on programmes

2020-present Director, Special Projects, Arts in Medicine Fellowship

- Training artists and health professionals annually on art practices for use in healthcare settings

2019-present Vice President, Advisory Board, Alliance Française Lagos

- Establishing policies and advising on programmes
- Promoting the teaching and learning of the French language
- Promoting awareness and understanding of francophone cultures
- Fostering friendly and mutually beneficial relationships between local French speaking populations and the surrounding community
- Working with the other board members and staff to adapt courses and cultural programmes to the
- evolving demographics and business environment of Lagos to achieve sustainable increases in membership, attendance at events, course enrollment and francophone cultural programmes

2018-present Advisory Group on Technology and Creativity of The Nigeria Industrial Policy and Competitiveness Advisory Council (chaired by HE, the Vice President of Nigeria)

- Working closely with the Nigerian Government and other relevant stakeholders in articulating, supporting and implementing policies and initiatives that create an enabling environment for creativity and innovation

2018-present Member, Working Group set up by the National Assembly, British Council and the Entertainment section of the Nigerian Bar Association

- Review 8 laws not limited to the Copyright Act, Trademark Act, Counterfeit Goods Act and Patent Act

2015-present Member, Advisory Board, West Africa Development Book Fund (funded by Ford Foundation)

- Developing and implementing fundraising strategies
- Leading on the review of manuscripts while advising on marketing and distribution of published books

2015-present Member, Editorial Board, Network, the publication of the Nigerian-British Chamber of Commerce (NBCC)

- Resuscitated the bi-monthly business publication of the NBCC
- Defining the overall strategic direction of the magazine
- Developing and approving informative and appealing content to optimise business opportunities and partnerships between Nigeria and UK-based companies
- Liaising and building formidable relations with NBCC partner organisations including UK-Tier while facilitating seamless transmission of content
- Ensuring integrity and accuracy of the magazine
- Building and maintaining a strong network of partners and advertisers
- Leading a specialised team of designers, editorial consultants and marketers

2013-present Board Member, National Gallery of Art, Nigeria

- Formulate policies with other board members and advise on programmes

2013-present Board Member, Reproduction Rights Society of Nigeria (REPRONIG)

- Formulate policies to protect the rights of authors in the literary field

2013-present President, Society of Nigerian Artists

- Led a delegation of stakeholders to a public hearing at the Federal House of Representatives on a bill to Repeal and Re-Enact the National Gallery of Art Act
- Led a delegation of stakeholders to the public hearing at the Senate on a bill to Repeal and Re-Enact the Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation Act
- Investiture of the Vice President of Nigeria as the Society's Grand Patron
- Partnership with the Nigerian Board for Technical Education in engendering the highest professional standards of teaching in technical colleges (tertiary) offering art in Nigeria
- Fundraised and planned events to mark Society's 50th anniversary
- Organised first major auction, raising over N5million to sustain and meet the objectives of the Society
- Organised 3 major international conferences to encourage interdisciplinary interaction in Lagos, Uyo and Benin—in collaboration with the University of Benin
- Advocating in coordination with Arterial Network and Committee for Relevant Arts (CORA), a consortium of all professional bodies in the Nigerian creative sector on the release of wrongfully incarcerated renowned performance artist, Jelili Atiku
- Overseeing the professional body for all practicing visual artists in Nigeria consisting of over 4,000 members of historians, critics, writers, conservators, curators, academics and students
- Overseeing an annual programme of exhibitions, conferences, skill enhancement and welfare

- programmes
- Building and maintaining relationships with international professional bodies in the creative art space and federal agencies including the Nigerian Copyright Commission and the Federal Bureau of Statistics
 - Secured a new secretariat for the Society at Freedom Park, Lagos
 - Established the Society's College of Fellows
 - Established the Society's Hall of Fame in collaboration with the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON)
 - Rebranding and repositioning of the Society including corporate collateral, websites and social media platforms
 - Establishment of the Society's newsletter
 - Redrafting of the Society's constitution
 - Drafting communication and Whatsapp policies
 - Book publication of the history of the Society
 - Ongoing partnership with the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON) on the annual MUSON festival
 - Ongoing partnership with Jackson, Etti & Edu to offer free legal advisory to SNA on matters relating to the development of the visual arts sector and improvement of the socio-economic welfare of its members

2011-present Member, Advisory Board, Art Exchange

Providing advice on loans, acquisition financing, dealer inventory financing and collections management

SCHOLARLY AND PROFESSIONAL PUBLICATIONS

Books

- 2018 The Nigerian Stock Exchange: The Collection
- 2017 Ayaya: The Mfon Usoro Collection, Contemporary Art (Volume 1)
- 2017 Ayaya: The Mfon Usoro Collection, Traditional Arts and Craft (volume 2)
- 2013 Access Bank: The Collection
- 2012 The Art of Olaniwun Ajayi LP

Articles

- 'Williams Chechet: A Heightened State of Becoming', published on www.omenkaonline.com, January 2021
- 'The Rising Value of Nigerian Art-Part 2', BusinessDay Weekender, November 2020. Pg. 16
- 'The Rising Value of Nigerian Art-Part 1', BusinessDay Weekender, November 2020. Pg. 10
- 'Independence and Modern Nigerian Art (Part 2)', BusinessDay Weekender, October 2020. Pg. 20

- 'Independence and Modern Nigerian Art', BusinessDay Weekender, October 2020. Pg. 19
- 'Kehinde Awofeso: Challenging and Refining Gender Identities and Roles', published on www.omenkaonline.com, June 2020
- 'Ikechukwu Ezeigwe's Hybrid World of Politics and Satire', published on www.omenkaonline.com, June 2020
- 'Ebenezer Akinola on Creating Purposeful and Relevant Art', published on www.omenkaonline.com, June 2020
- 'Steve Ekpenisi: Excerpts from The Iron Bender's Diary', published on www.omenkaonline.com, June 2020
- 'Jacqueline Suowari " The Black Ballpoint Pen is Magic', published on www.omenkaonline.com, September 2019
- 'Raél Jero Salley on Commemorating and Celebrating Black Experience', published on www.omenkaonline.com, September 2019
- 'Alimi Adewale on Disruption, Innovation and Resisting Expectations', published on www.omenkaonline.com, September 2019
- 'Ingrid Bolton on Microbiology, Farming and Art Activism', published on www.omenkaonline.com, September 2019
- 'Torlowei: Redefining High-End Fashion in Africa', published on www.omenkaonline.com, August 2019
- 'In Conversation with Kimathi Donkor', published on www.omenkaonline.com, August 2019
- 'Emeka Ogboh on Sound, Mnemonics and Collective Experiences', published on www.omenkaonline.com, June 2019
- 'In Conversation with Olayinka Dosekun', published on www.omenkaonline.com, May 2019
- 'Retro Africa: Housing the Future of African Art', published on www.omenkaonline.com, March 2019
- 'Dean Mitchell's Affirmation and Projection of Black Identity', published on www.omenkaonline.com, April 2019
- 'Tobenna Okwuosa on History, Religion, Politics and the Artist', published on www.omenkaonline.com, April 2019
- 'Stacey Okparavero on Urhobo Deities and the Niger Delta', published on www.omenkaonline.com, March 2019
- 'Adji Dieye's Red Fever', published on www.omenkaonline.com, November 2018
- 'In Conversation with Ruby Onyinyechi Amanze', published on www.omenkaonline.com, April 2018
- 'Nigerian Film as an Art', published on www.omenkaonline.com, June 2018
- 'Soulful Singer Mary Akpa in Harmattan Colours', published on www.omenkaonline.com, January 2018
- 'Dotun Popoola: Irin Ajo' published on www.omenkaonline.com, February 2018

'Dabira in Support of African Fashion and Design', Omenka magazine, January 2018. 84-88
 'As a Famous Coffin Maker, Paa Joe Turns 70', Omenka magazine, January 2018. Pg. 80-83
 'Elisabeth Sutherland on Her Art and Belief in the Afterlife', Omenka magazine, January 2018. 74-79
 'In Conversation with Hannah O'leary', Omenka magazine, January 2018. Pg. 42-44
 'Atong Atem's Migrant Narratives', published on www.omenkaonline.com, February 2017
 'CrazinisT artisT: Rituals of Becoming', published on www.omenkaonline.com, February 2017
 'Ask the Curator: Uche Okpa-Iroha', published on www.omenkaonline.com, February 2017
 'Against the Craze for Foreign Goods', published on www.omenkaonline.com, February 2017
 'Robert Devereux on the Magical and the Real', published on www.omenkaonline.com, February 2017
 'In Conversation with Moffat Takadiwa', published on www.omenkaonline.com, February 2017
 'As Told by Fati Abubakar', published on www.omenkaonline.com, February 2017
 'The Poetics of Clay', published on www.omenkaonline.com, January 2017
 'Dismantling Stereotypes of the Strong Black Woman', published on www.omenkaonline.com, January 2017
 'On Identity, Femininity and Politics', published on www.omenkaonline.com, January 2017
 'Towards an Increased Appreciation of Video Art', published on www.omenkaonline.com, January 2017
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'Art14 London, Setting New Heights', Omenka magazine, January 2014. Pg. 120-126

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Exhibition Catalogues

'Now She Wears Herself: The Art of Jacqueline Suowari' exhibition catalogue, January 2021.

'Chinedu Onuigbo and Obi Nwaegbe: Differing Perspectives on a Nation at Crossroads', Crossroads exhibition catalogue, December 2020.

'Williams Chechet: A Heightened State of Becoming', Hyperflux exhibition catalogue, December 2020. Pg. 31-32

'The Sacred and the Secular in the Art of Oseloka Osadebe' Oseloka Osadebe: Inner Light exhibition catalogue, September 2018. Pg. 25-29

'The Next Frontiers: Building Tomorrow's Masterpieces', FREIA exhibition catalogue, December 2017. Pg. 7-8

'Of Space, Time and Perception', Ebenezer Akinola: Where Do We Go from Here? exhibition catalogue, November 2017. Pg. 6-9

'Ascension, a Revival of the Traditional', Ascension exhibition catalogue, August 2017. Pg. 7-8

'Of Being Present: Boundaries and Zones of Transition', Wanderlust exhibition catalogue, June 2017. Pg. 21-25

Gallery Statement, Adeola Balogun: Bubbles of Emotion exhibition catalogue, June 2017. Pg. 8

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'Niger Delta: A Sensitization to its Stark Realities', Delta Bush Refineries and Other Stories exhibition catalogue, December 2016. Pg.8

'On Insanity and on Perfection', Insanity exhibition catalogue, November 2016. Pg. 6

'Evolving Currents: A Conversation Between Raqib Bashorun and Chika Idu', Evolving Currents exhibition catalogue, April 2016. Pg. 9-10

'In Conversation with Joel Mpah Dooch', Time to Meet exhibition catalogue, March 2016. Pg. 7

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'Raqib Bashorun at 60, a Cycle of Perfection', Evolving in 360 exhibition catalogue, September 2015. Pg. 7

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'Introduction', Duke Asidere: The Artist and His Muse exhibition, catalogue, November 2014. Pg. 6-21

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' Ojeikere and Stephens: Networks and Voids, Modern Interpretations of Nigerian Hairstyles and

Headdresses' (exhibition of same title), October 2013. Pg. 7
 'Cedric Nunn: Call and Response', Cedric Nunn: Call and Response exhibition catalogue, September 2013. Pg. 6
 'Nnenna Okore and Adejoke Tugbiyele: Matter as Metaphor', (exhibition of same title), September 2013. Pg. 8
 'Two Artists, a Shared Vision', Soundspiration exhibition catalogue, March 2013. Pg. 6
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 'Alternate Perspectives: New Currents in Nigerian and Italian Contemporary Art', Crosscurrents exhibition catalogue, March 2011. Pg. 10
 Ben Enwonwu: Life and Times (exhibition of same title), November 2008. Pg. 2

CONFERENCES/INVITED LECTURES/PRESENTATIONS/ JURY PANELS

2021 Guest, 'Nigeria Speaks', organised by 94.1 Rainbow FM
 2021 'A Pathway Towards Encouraging Creative Education and Enhancing Critical Thinking', organised by Jelosimi Art Center
 2020 Jury member, 'Dripping with Gratitude' Youth Challenge, organised by the Emmanuel Chapel Methodist Church, Lagos
 2020 'Reiterating the Importance of Art History with Emphasis on Reliable Data' organised by International Institute for Creative Development
 2020 11th Annual Panel Discussion on Contemporary African Diaspora Art organised by CADA International
 2020 'The Role of Art in effective Healthcare Delivery in Nigeria' organised by Arts in Medicine Fellowship
 2020 Jury member, 'Interpretation of the Future of Art in Africa Post COVID-19', organised by Artmat
 2020 'The Artist and the Art Business', organised by Federal College of Education (Tech.), Akoka
 2020 'The Rising Value of Modern and Contemporary Nigerian Art', organised by MTN Nigeria

2020 'The Rising Value of Modern and Contemporary Nigerian Art', organised by The Nigerian Stock Exchange
 2020 'A Brief History of Nigerian Art', organised by The Nigerian Stock Exchange
 2019 Keynote Address delivered on the occasion of the opening ceremony of The 2019 Lagos Biennial
 2019 Presenter, 'Changing the Copyright Narrative for Wealth Creation', organised by the Nigerian Copyright Commission
 2019 Moderator, 'Exploring the Power of Creative Tourism to Drive Tourism Receipts', Nigeria Travel Week, MUSON Centre, Lagos
 2019 Presenter/ Panel discussion, 'Exploring the Realities for Future', Annual Real Estate Business and Professional Summit
 2019 Presenter, 'Point of View: Artist's Resale Right's', organised by The Ben Enwonwu Foundation, Alliance Française Lagos/Mike Adenuga Centre
 2019 Speaker, Archiving and Documenting Workshop, organised by Revolving Art Incubator, Lagos
 2019 Speaker, 'Visual Arts and its Role', Waste-to-Art-Week, organised by A Woman's Heart Foundation (AWHF) at the British Council, Lagos
 2019 Jury member, 'Pan-African Emerging Painting Invitational Prize & Exhibition' organised by First Floor Gallery, Zimbabwe
 2019 Guest judge Africa's Young Entrepreneurs
 2018 Jury member, ART X Prize, organised by ART X Lagos
 2018 Special guest, 'My House through the Eyes of Angels' Special needs art workshop for kids with autism and development disorders
 2017 'The Formation of National Identity and Preservation of History,' Q&A with Oliver Enwonwu, Tate Modern Conference 'Positioning Nigerian Modernism' on the occasion of Ben Enwonwu's Centenary
 2017 Workshop: Strengthening National Capacities for the Implementation of the 2005 Convention, Ogun organised by UNESCO
 2017 Panel discussion 'Art Publications and Platforms' organised by Intense Magazine, CCA Lagos
 2017 'A Re-Evaluation of the Contributions of Ben Enwonwu to a Philosophical Basis for Modern Nigerian Art', 17th Triennial Symposium on African Art, University of Ghana, Legon
 2017 Lecture on public art, centred on the work of Yinka Shonibare, delivered to senior students of Greensprings Secondary School, Lekki, Edgewood College, Ikoyi and Strong Tower Academy, Ikorodu (organised by the British Council Nigeria, Yinka Shonibare Studio, GT Bank and Stephen Friedman Gallery)
 2017 Head, jury panel, "ARTmosphere", art competition organised by GT Bank, British Council Nigeria and Stephen Friedman Gallery

- 2017 Panel discussion, 'Art the Disruptive Expansion: A Case for the Museums', Lagos Book and Art Festival, Freedom Park, Lagos
- 2016 Panel discussion 'African Art and its Markets: Hype or Reality?' (Art X, Lagos, moderator)
- 2016 Lecture on public sculpture delivered to senior students of Greensprings Secondary School, Anthony, (organised by the British Council Nigeria, Yinka Shonibare Studio, GT Bank and Stephen Friedman Gallery)
- 2015 Jury member, Joburg Art Fair Selection Committee
- 2015 'The Role of Emerging Artists in the Nigerian Society', Federal College of Education (Tech.), Akoka
- 2015 'The Rising Value of Nigerian Arts', International Conference on Disabilities (ICD) Art Exhibition Auction and Sales, Lagos
- 2015 Picture Africa for Peace and Development (Peace Media Parley), International Press Centre, Lagos
- 2014 Jury member, 7th National Art Competition, African Artists Foundation, Lagos
- 2012 'The Rising Value of Nigerian Art', Arthouse Contemporary Ltd, Lagos
- 2012 Creative Enterprise and Innovation Train the Trainer Workshop organised by the British Council in conjunction with The National Endowment for technology and Arts (NESTA)

(Full list to be provided on request)

HONOURS AND AWARDS

- 2019 Fellowship of the Institute of Management Consultants
- 2016 Pace Setters Foundation Merit Award
- 2014 Outstanding Service Award presented by SNA Lagos Chapter
- 2011 The Theatre Centrik Award

ART COLLECTIONS

- Bank of Industry Nigeria
- Delta State Government
- National Gallery of Art Nigeria
- Former Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, His Excellency Alhaji Atiku Abubakar GCON
- Government House, Asaba, Nigeria
- Government House, Ughelli, Nigeria
- Embassy of the Republic of Ireland, Abuja

- Head Office, Custodian and Allied, Keffi Street, Lagos
- Head Office, Al-Dawood Shipping lines, Bombay Crescent, Apapa, Lagos
- Vantage Medical Centre, Fabac Close, Victoria Island, Annex, Lagos

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

- Society of Nigerian Artists (President, 2013-present)
- Society of Nigerian Artists (Chairman, Lagos State Chapter, 2008-2013)
- Member, Arts Council of the African Studies Association

CURATOR



Sandra Mbanefo Obiago is an art curator, photographer and award winning filmmaker who is passionate about strengthening the creative industry to develop the African continent. She is Founder and Artistic Director of SMO Contemporary Art, curating art exhibitions in non-traditional gallery spaces to promote the best of African art. She started her career in 1988 as a technical director and video editor at the European Business Channel in Zurich, Switzerland. Two years later she joined environmental group, WWF International, and covered environment and development projects in Sub-Saharan Africa as a photojournalist for eight years. In 1998 she founded Communicating for Change (CFC), a media for development social enterprise based in Lagos, which became an important content provider for local and international television stations. Her award winning films and radio programs focused on human rights, women's empowerment, HIV & AIDS, environment, democracy and good governance, and art for development. Obiago is a Fellow of the Aspen Institute's African Leadership Initiative for West Africa (ALIWA). She has a Bachelor of Education degree from the University of Manitoba in Canada, and a Masters of Arts in Telecommunications from Michigan State University, USA. Obiago focuses on using creativity as an avenue for wealth creation and inspiring a positive narrative about Africa for local and international audiences



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The Alliance Française of Lagos is a Nigerian non-profit institution dedicated to the promotion of French language and francophone cultures, and to the promotion of cultural diversity. Based in Ikoyi and Ikeja, the Alliance Française of Lagos offers French classes for all kinds of audiences, as well as professional translation services for private and corporate needs. It also offers a variety of cultural events such as exhibitions, screenings and concerts all year long.

The Alliance Française of Lagos is part of a worldwide associative network created more than 135 years ago in Paris, established in 133 countries and welcoming nearly 500,000 learners every year. In Nigeria itself, Alliances Françaises are present in 10 cities: Ilorin, Kaduna, Kano, Jos, Maiduguri, Enugu, Owerri, Port Harcourt and Ibadan. [Click here](#) for more information regarding the AF Nigerian network.



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

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

www.smocontemporary.com



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