





IBE ANANABA

**TOWARDS
THE LIGHT**

Curated by





TOWARDS THE LIGHT

We are living in momentous times. It feels like every day the ground is shifting and there is an upsurge of events, which leaves us breathless, sometimes scared and angry, often times astonished and mindful that we are riding on a racing wave, which is larger than us. After all that we have been through this historic year of the corona pandemic, it is a balm and solace to present *Towards The Light*, a solo exhibition of recent works by painter-philosopher Ibe Ananaba.

This body of work could not come at a better time. While adjusting to a bizarre “new normal” way of life, and racing through eventful, inspiring days of the #EndSARS #EndPolice Brutality” youth movement which is gaining ground across Nigeria, Ananaba’s powerful works remind us of the luminosity of our inner voice, the power of community, and the hope, vitality and pure creative energy of our youth.

Towards The Light is an exhibition of paintings and drawings grounded in a musical track which encapsulates the rhythm of a generation seeking answers to fundamental questions about identity and equality, democracy, racism and the right to choice and good governance.

How it all began

Ananaba is a graduate of the Institute of Management & Technology (IMT) Art School in Enugu, and has spent the better part of his career working in advertising, honing his technique and artistry as a Fashion Illustrator, Designer, Caricaturist, Portraitist and Art Director.

His art is deeply influenced by growing up in the bustling town of Aba, eastern Nigeria, which has always been recognized as the epicenter of small-scale entrepreneurial ingenuity and industry. Ananaba’s artistic roots are deeply embedded in the creative spirit pulsating out of this vibrant commercial hub, a place where “anything can be produced”, which fueled his youthful creativity. He saw the populated city streets as a fashion runway, and began designing shoes, t-shirts, and jeans while still in secondary school. Ananaba’s fashion was infused by the urban styles and vibes from MTV videos he watched with his friends, along with a mélange of Nigerian hip hop, afro-beat, gospel and R&B music they danced to.

After graduating with an Higher National Diploma with a distinction in painting in 1999 , Ananaba quickly became a prolific creative voice in the Lagos art scene, known for his edgy paintings and powerful sketches. The first time I encountered his art was at a solo exhibition, *Against All Odds*, held at the Goethe Institute in Lagos in 2009. I was fascinated by his detailed and perfectly rendered red ball-point pen drawings. The perfection of his strokes, fine and

miniscule, and his ability to reflect the subtlety of light, and nuanced texture was impressive.

I remember the luminous power in his portrait of Madam Ekundayo, a modern day saint in her nineties, who had provided shelter and love to hundreds of orphans, and became famous through the hit music video by the celebrated Nigerian photographer-singer TY Bello. Every intricate line in her portrait showed an immersive roadmap of a life of service. Ekundayo's gaze and the play of light were masterful.

Over the years, Ananaba's art has also provided critical commentary to the state of the nation and African socio-politics. His 2018 exhibition, *Long Drawn Shadows* at Art 21 in Lagos, was a critical response to the effects of incessant fuel shortages. His installation of paintings on walls lined with empty jerry cans, brought home the reality of endless queues across the nation, illustrating the dashed dreams and frustrations of the citizenry, the inequities and senseless squandering of the nation's resources, and the impunity of leadership vis-à-vis the hollow sycophancy of the political class.

At the same time, Ananaba celebrates the microcosm of society. He is the only artist I know, who held a family exhibition, *Bonding*, presenting his art alongside paintings by his children and Adaobi Onyejike-Ananaba, his artist-activist wife, who runs an NGO (Girl Child Art Foundation)

which empowers adolescent girls through art. His children's incessant precocious questions while cooped up at home during the pandemic inspired a number of works in this exhibition, providing a filter to the larger questions being demanded by the youth across the nation.

Where do we go from here?

Ananaba's award winning art is deeply spiritual as he reminds us that the battle is worth the fight in *Joy Comes In the Morning*, a large black and white charcoal and acrylic drawing on archival paper. His figures are in motion, in a process of metamorphosis, evolving through a frenzied dance of exhilaration, anticipating a resolution which will hopefully bring clarity and joy.

Ananaba's art rides on the back of strong musical influences which have provided the chorus to his mastery of technique, interpretation of light, and a clear, effortless, delivery of visual poetry. During the months of the corona virus lock down, he kept busy in his studio, a safe cocoon in which music inspired each brush stroke as he painted to drown out the insecurity, the anxiety, the uncertainty, and keep the pandemic at bay. His subjects are presented in strong contrast, with powerful sources of light, which act as sheaves of hope filtering through dark spaces.

His *All Will Be Well* series shows isolated figures in retreat, waiting, reading, sleeping, thinking, hoping, dreaming,

some with their heads doused in furious red colors, yearning for more. His works respond to a mental soundscape of “can’t sleep, can’t hug, can’t shake, can’t cope, can’t breathe, “ which came to a crescendo during the Black Lives Matter protests, where the “Ultra-Black” sound track by Nas, the African-American rapper, became a rallying cry through Ananaba’s art. But finally, his work circles back to the mantra that “all will be well” and that, despite the darkness, we need to keep moving towards the light.

He renders his subjects with deft impressionistic brushstrokes, echoing colorful memories of a liberated time, drawing us into rarely visited internal spaces, experiencing renewed joy and peace away from the rush of our noisy, complex lives. With each portrait, we enjoy an inner reverie, which the artist reminds us, we need to guard and find solace in.

Listen to the Youth

In a country and on a continent where over half the population is below the age of 15, it is prophetic that Ananaba draws our attention to the youth, who have the power to re-awaken our lost inner-child. His painting *At the End of the Tunnel* encourages us to revisit the exuberance, the energy, and the place of naïve dreams and aspirations we once had. We see children running across his canvas with arms spread out in full flight, reminding us to give life to dreams of an equitable future.



Rise Again,
Acrylics on canvas, 20x 24 inches, 2019

The refrain, "Look way deep inside yourself. Discover the diamond inside, find your wealth" by Nas, is an important philosophy which echos through Ananaba's powerful body of work.

We hope you draw strength and renewed vision from *Towards The Light*, and we trust that these works will renew our hope in the power of art to heal and inspire, while we gain strength to continue forging onwards and upwards in the fight for a better tomorrow.

Sandra Mbanefo Obiako
Curator





Towards The Light I,
Acrylics on canvas, 30 x 30 inches, 2020

As deep calls unto deep,
lift up your eyes unto the light
where love dwells.
Open up your heart and
deeply connect with the
truth as the light beckons.

In search of the essential,
fix your gaze upon the light
withholding nothing.

Sanitize your mind,
unmask your fears
and let the light lead you on.
Words cannot express
the awesome divine nature
of light.

Enter the zone
and bask in glory,
in the light the feeling
is beyond extraordinary.

Proceed with your entire plight
pursue with great delight.

Let your peace within take flight,
as you look Towards The Light.



Ibe Ananaba (born in Belgium), grew up in Aba, Nigeria, and was inspired to draw at an early age by his older brother who is also an artist. He eventually studied Fine and Applied Arts at the Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu, Nigeria and graduated with Distinction in Painting in 1999. Ananaba worked as an Art Director in the advertising industry for fifteen years before going into full-time studio practice. Always willing to push creative boundaries, he experiments using an interdisciplinary approach to his art, working as a painter, fashion illustrator, art director, calligraphist, designer, and muralist. He has taken part in many group shows and solo exhibitions in Nigeria, South Africa, the United States, the UK, Israel, and

Canada. He won First Prize in the *Art Masters Contest*, at Art Vancouver in 2019. His work is in important collections including the National Assembly Abuja, and he has regularly taught workshops and seminars on diverse topics including '*Harnessing your artistic potential*', amongst many others. Ananaba also volunteers as the Chief Art Consultant and Coordinator of studio programs for the Girl Child Art Foundation, a non-governmental organization committed to using art as an advocacy tool for adolescent girls. Ananaba created *Follow the Journey*, a large mural project at the Seven-Up Bottling Company headquarters in Lagos, where he painted a stunning visual timeline of the company's journey in Nigeria, from inception in 1960 till date. In 2016, he led the *African Child Advocacy Wall Mural Campaign*, a collaborative project with the Canadian High Commission in Abuja, Nigeria. Ananaba's art has been understudied and used as case studies by various university scholars for their project thesis across Nigeria. His works has been featured in numerous international publications including *Fashion: A Second Language* (Shoko Press, London, 2020), *Watercolor Artists Magazine* (2019), *Masters of Watercolors* (Planeta Muzyki Publishers, Finland, 2018), *The Villager* (Tracey McDonald Publishers, South Africa, 2018), *Fashion Illustration Africa*, (Shoko Press, London, 2016) and *Artists of Nigeria* (5 Continents Edition, Italy, 2012), and is listed in the Smithsonian Institution Libraries Collection. Ananaba lives in Lagos where he maintains his studio.



Joy Comes In The Morning

Charcoal and Acrylics on archival paper, 44 x 95 in, 2020





Conversation With The Future (Faith In Uncertain Times)
Acrylics on canvas, 52 x 88 in, 2020



With the mind as one's weapon as well as control centre, it's most ideal to load it with some good dose of courage in these uncertain times. The painting articulates my attempt to beam some light in my daughter's mind that we will get through all this and come out stronger. It is a heart-to-heart message of hope, as I like to view life from an optimistic angle. The animated progression of the poses ultimately leads to the assurance that by strongly holding on to faith, WE SHALL OVERCOME!



At The End Of The Tunnel
Acrylics on canvas, 51 x 88 in, 2020



"At the End of the Tunnel encourages us to revisit the exuberance, the energy, and the place of naïve dreams and aspirations we once had. We see children running across Ibe's canvas with arms spread out in full flight, reminding us to give life to dreams of an equitable future."

Sandra Mbanefo Obiako



WHERE DO WE GO
FROM HERE?



Where Do We Go From Here?,
Acrylics on canvas, 30 x 30 in, 2019



This or that... Left or Right... Move or Wait. Which way forward? How did we get here? More than a million unanswered questions abound. You sef wey dey read... WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE? There comes a moment in life where you find yourself at a Crossroad. A point at which you must make that crucial decision which will have far-reaching consequences in order to navigate your way in life. The thought of freezing such moments on canvas gave life to this piece!



Where Do We Go From Here? III,
Acrylics on canvas, 30 x 30 inches, 2019



ALL WILL BE WELL



All Will Be Well I, II
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in, 2020



All Will Be Well III, IV
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in, 2020



All Will Be Well VI
 Acrylics on canvas, 30 x 30 in, 2020



All Will Be Well VIII,
 Acrylics on canvas, 30 x 30 in, 2020



"Ananaba's dexterity with the palette knife in bringing to light our daily lives is incomparable to no other artist of his generation. This new body of works succinctly captures both the gloom and hope of our current existence. The anchor and beauty that tie it all together is the optimism that "Towards The Light" portends for all of us."

Victor Ehikhamenor
Artist
Founder, Angels & Muse, Lagos



All Will Be Well V

Acrylics on canvas, 30 x 30 in, 2020

Issues that influence contemporary living within my environment largely inspire my art. Monitoring the organic progression of my sketches basically informs my creative direction. I enjoy employing multidisciplinary approaches to my creations, in my quest for new experiences and to deepen the audience's interactivity with my art. I also value the therapeutic angle of the creative process as it engages my senses and opens new discoveries. Having to pause for deeper self-reflection on how to keep my head above the waters, alongside grappling with understanding the 'new normal' led to creating these works. It is a personal search for the glimpse of an anticipated sunny side of life and holding on to faith, with hope that all will be well regardless of the heavy tides we collectively swim against. My goal is to present visual songs of hope, and to look beyond the surface with the right focus, for the bigger opportunities that will ultimately make humanity smile, once again!

Ibeabuchi Ananaba

SEEING INTO IBE

A few years ago, Sandra Mbanefo-Obiogo exhibited Ibe Ananaba and I at Temple Muse, Lagos. That event was the beginning of our friendship. The first thing you immediately realize is that Ibe Ananaba is an excellent draughtsman. Every other thing in his work is beside the fact. He pushes an idea, and that idea evolves into a series of two, sometimes three or more paintings. In this recent exhibition titled *Towards the Light*, Ibe presents a body of work created during this period of the pandemic- lockdowns, social distancing, and staying close to family.

He has been painting between home and his art studio, a few blocks away. Oftentimes his children accompany him, as the schools have been closed. Since leaving the advertising industry to focus on his painting career, Ibe uses his work as a rallying point for strengthening family ties with his wife (who was in art school with him) and his two children (whose works were featured alongside Ibe's in a joint exhibition in 2018 aptly titled *Bonding*). In one corner of the studio hang some of his children's paintings, distinct for their non-figurative, enthusiastic use of color.

The artist often paints suited men in hats, but one is yet to see him dress like that. Growing up in Aba, South East Nigeria, he grew accustomed to the vibes of that sprawling city market that supplies fashion wares to neighboring West African

cities. The tailors and craftsmen of Aba are highly skilled workmen whose works give the popular fashion brands from the West a run for their money. Ibe recalls the family albums of black and white photographs of his parents, uncles and aunts posing for the photographer in their trendy clothes, hats and all. The well-dressed people in his canvases became stronger metaphors when he found out about the flamboyant dressers of the Congo, the Sapeurs (The group La Sape is the acronym for the Société des ambassadeurs et des personnes élégantes) The expensive outfits of these ghetto-dwelling people may illustrate a failure in the setting of priorities in some societies. This paradoxical flaunting of wealth while living in squalor totally blows the mind of any rational thinking person. Ibe Ananaba's works situates in this mix- colorful and tastefully dressed subjects become burdened with the task of delivering strong political statements. This grand show must go on even as things go south. The figures mime poses reminiscent of shots from a fashion week. While enthusing about poise, elegance and glamor, Ananaba's works reflects on the dark sides of the human condition. The paintings are all the more spectacular because of the artist's preferred tool- the palette knife. He masterfully welds this obtuse tool to create riveting portraits. The monochromatic gradations of color show that the focus in the work lies elsewhere- in the drawing of the subject. The subject matter revolves around themes that connect with his creative process rather than to any final visual presentation. Yet he makes politically charged statements with a consciousness for the daily struggles of

living in Lagos, Nigeria and the ineptitude of governance.

The idea of chiaroscuro is key to how he positions his subject. Then like an older Rembrandt he muddles up physical appearances without losing the essence. Ibe Ananaba understands that the light touching form is what delineates, what explains and gives meaning. Thus, he paints in darks and middle tones, finally resolving form in the lighter tones. To provoke deep thought, images of the human figure need not be broken as though one is looking through a prism.

Like his mother, Ibe is at odds with the idea of having a specific signature. His creative energy feels caged by this slowing down, monotonous marking. For a long time, the artist used a quickly doodled smiling face as signature. For the ever-cheerful artist that was easy to remember. Nowadays everyone is advised to wear a mask as a health safety precaution for curbing the spreading of the Coronavirus. The mask becomes symbolic as a necessary monotonous obliterator of smiles, a stifler of laughter, and on the other hand a compassionate preserver of life.

In a series of acrylic paintings titled *Amidst the Noise* Ibe still sits the subject in the center of the canvas, drawn in using the palette knife with varying shades of color. The artist sends out a message of laughter and hope that must be included in our daily lives during these trying times of a 'new norm'. Here he adds simplistic line drawings to contrast the central

subject- hundreds of smiling faces in the flat background. Some of the faces resemble the stick figures that children draw when learning to represent humans. Upon close observation one finds that these randomly drawn faces vary stylistically from the quick one liner to more expressive caricatures. Ibe points out that his two children doodled some of the faces. He wanted to keep them engaged. In public spaces these days a visibly smiling face is frowned upon as being 'insensitive and endangering'. Seeking a way to explain the times to his children, he codes in shorthand human faces. Viewed from a distance, the recurring faces resemble textures of heavily applied color breaking the flat color plane, bordering the human figure drawn in with swift slashes of paint applied using the palette knife. Ibe is moved to recollect the myriad facial expressions of people.

For as long as he can remember Ibe Ananaba has been inspired by music. He used to sing in a choir. As a student at IMT Enugu, he enjoyed the mimed, rap concerts on weekends. In those days learning the lyrics of a song took arduous rewinding of the tape. This sort of repeated learning improves one's grasp of the language. Understanding the lyrics of songs inspired Ibe's admiration for the poetic genius of rap music, and his all-time favorite artist became NAS the American rapper. Listening to music evokes the themes around which Ibe creates new work. Socially conscious, trendy, fashionable, politically conscious... these words describe rap music. You may also be talking about Ibe Ananaba's paintings.

A set of 3 paintings called *The Promisor and the Praise Singers* questions the inaction/actions of political leaders and their crowd of sycophantic followers. The series echoes the critical tone of *Long Drawn Shadows*, Ibe Ananaba's 2018 exhibition in Art Twenty-One, Lagos. His social awareness and activism are encouraged by his wife's Girl Child Art Foundation where he volunteers as Chief Art Consultant. He conveys the dire living conditions of everyday people in Nigeria. The titles of his works ring with the familiarity of headlines from the daily newspapers. His subjects pose like runway models in an international fashion week themed on the economic and political malaise of the masses.

Nigerians thrive on the sense of community, shared activities and bonding so the idea of social distancing is particularly difficult.

Some 10 paintings are titled *All will be well*, a body of work contemplating individuals making sense of virtual relationships over the mobile phone and online. These periods of isolated living have drawn the artist to make visual documents of everything. The tale is the same from Ojuelegba, Trafalgar Square, Eiffel Tower to Times Square—once crowded landscapes, streets and popular centers of human activity worldwide are now deserted, silent spaces. Interestingly the artist has included some landscape paintings in this new body of work. Since this pandemic, there is a rethink about the idea and relevance of spaces.



Reassurance,
Acrylics on canvas, 36 x 36 in, 2020

Venues for holding large crowd gatherings like stadiums and churches are being redesigned to fit the new rules that humanity must adjust to, till a cure for the virus is found. These times give all humanity ample opportunities for self-recollection and reflection. Venues like the Wheatbaker are opening to the public to showcase adjustments of their interior decoration in line with WHO and NCDC health and safety regulations for curbing the spread of the virus.

Another painting titled *Conversation with the Future* is a portrait of the artist's daughter. The artist says that this work reminds him that there is a future (in his child's growth) of moving on. This sentiment runs as a subtheme to the exhibition *Towards the Light*. Another painting titled *Where do we go from here?* has figures of seated people. The artist has worked from a picture of some detained suspects. Sadly, stories abound of some of these youths outstaying the time they would have done for the crime while awaiting trial. Apart from the landscapes, another new trend in the exhibition *Towards the Light* are some surprising still-life that would normally act as props for human figures. This time the objects stand alone, as subject matter with the light streaming in from one side of the canvas. The drama of these well composed still-life leaves an eerie feeling in the viewer. Where have the people gone? That is the question on people's lip as we step out of lockdowns, self-isolation and lockdowns into a new way of living. There is a withdrawal from each other even as we meet and greet. Is it caution, self-preservation or fear? People's gazes seem

a bit distant as they breathe in the air and walk into the sunlight. It leaves this taste for a longing of another, past life. We all would prefer to go towards the light. Something good awaits.

Tony Nsofor
Artist



Everyday is indeed a blessing. Regardless of how tough life could be, I always count it as huge privilege to be able to go till the ground in order to stay afloat.

Count Your Blessings II,
Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches, 2020



AMIDST THE NOISE



Amidst The Noise I,
Acrylics and markers on canvas, 62 x 71.5 in, 2020



Amidst The Noise II,
Acrylics and markers on canvas, 62 x 71.5 in, 2020



The world seems to be in a chaotic state with the current pandemic. Alongside this are countless incidents like racial segregation, social injustice and the likes happening in different spheres and places at same time as the media bombards the public. In order to remain focused, the quest to stand tall, and never lose my 'cool' birthed the idea behind this self-motivational series.

This is about staying ultra 'who you are'... it's about rising to the occasion, standing twice as tall and staying true to your essence unapologetically as you keep your head up, regardless of tons of issues out there in your face to dampen your spirit.

The doodles in the background capture the fabric of our society at large. They also represent the cacophony of deafening uproar within our ecosystem while the main singular figure represents me, you- the viewer or whom it may concern.



Amidst The Noise III,
Acrylics and markers on canvas, 55.5 x 85.5 in, 2020



THE PROMISOR AND PRAISE SINGERS



In recent times, the intense conversations with regards to the political space in my society (both offline and online) have been of huge interest to me. In my pursuit to document the times, these have led to creation of a body of works inspired by political campaign posters. Viewing from the lens of a social observer, my intention is to visually respond with my personal observations of how gullible a people can be.

The Promisor And Praise Singers I,
Acrylics, oils and markers on canvas 36 x 42 inches, 2019



The Promisor And Praise Singers II,

Acrylics, oils and markers on canvas 36 x 42 inches, 2019



The Promisor And Praise Singers III,

Acrylics, oils and markers on canvas 36 x 42 inches, 2019



NEIGHBOURHOOD TALES



Neighbourhood Tales I,
Acrylics on Canvas, 24 x 30 in, 2019



Neighbourhood Tales II,
Acrylics on Canvas, 24 x 30 in, 2019



A times what you need is that casual stroll within the neighbourhood to decipher street revelations through the soundscape, aroma of whatever rocks your nasals, the feel of sweet breeze alongside the sight of all elements that make the environment buzzing.

But hold on!... Where are the people? Funny how the lockdown has turned lovely places to ghost towns. Let's patiently await a bounce back.



In a world of good, bad and the downright ugly, the power in one's vision would always play a vital role in how to navigate through life in order to thrive and remain uplifted. Vantage View is a metaphorical hint at a position one takes and the need to always get amazing perspectives so as to enjoy this gift called life and what it offers.

Vantage View,
Acrylics on Canvas, 30 x 30 in, 2019



This special piece, devoid of any human element pays huge homage to those who are no more here with us for one reason or the other. It's more like a celebration with fond memories of amazing souls in our hearts.

Evergreen Memories,
Acrylics on canvas, 30 x 30 in, 2020

In Conversation With Ibe Ananaba

Nneoma Ilogu: We're so excited about your exhibition. Tell us about your journey, You've been an artist for over twenty years. How have you grown into your unique creative voice?

Ibe Anananba: I was born in Belgium, and the first artist I met was my elder brother, Ugo Ananaba. I remember at 3 or 4 years of age, watching him draw comic book characters in his school books. I found it fascinating and tried to follow suit. Somewhere along the line I got frustrated, because I wanted to draw exactly like him, stroke by stroke, line by line. From emulating my brother, I began to discover my own voice and began opening my mind to the power of my own creativity.

Drawing became a hobby and I was more interested in magazine illustrations rather than photographs. We moved back to Nigeria, and I grew up in Aba, which is an industrious town and popular for being the place where "anything can be made". As far back as Primary 5, I had neighbors who manufactured shoes in Ariaria market where they made shoes. I understudied them and made my own prototype. I used a hardcover 80 leaves notebook to cut the sole of the shoe, and found some leather and strong adhesive to make bespoke shoes.

By the early 90s I became the designer in my clique of friends. We'd look at MTV videos and flip through magazines just to update our fashion sense and tap into the essence

of our times. It was the golden HipHop era with the likes of Naughty by Nature, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg and so on. We'd gotten a lot more conscious about feeling the pulse of the streets, and documenting fashion trends. We were making T-shirts, because I had friends whose family business dealt with fabrics, and had a friend who used to make the Jeans, I'd designed. We didn't have business sense then, so it was all very informal. We designed T-shirts, caps, and much more.

Eventually I followed my older brother and studied Fine and Applied Arts at the Institute of Technology (IMT), Enugu. Halfway into my first year, my JAMB results came out and I had gained admission into the University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN), but I was loving my time at IMT so I stayed there. I had many people I looked up to at IMT like Okechukwu Iwundu, Henry Morkah, Chamberlin Ukenedo, Chima Etu, and the late Damian Onyekuru. I'd say 90% of what I learnt in school was from these guys. I understudied their creative process and asked many questions.

Later, I came to Lagos for my industrial attachment at Dolphin Studios in Surulere, which was another turning point in my creative process. Dolphin Studios was a one-stop shop in the creative business. The ground floor was for photography, the first floor was for graphics (where I was assigned), and the second floor was for video, while the last floor was dedicated to sound recordings. I met the Who's Who in the creative industry such as Majek Fashek, Yvonne Chaka Chaka and many more. Dolphin Studios used to be a meeting place for anything creative, from advertising, Nollywood, to entertainment, generally.

I watched and experienced the process of how albums were recorded, and it expanded my mind, learning how people think, and consume messages. That was where I had the privilege of working with Uche James-Iroha, and meeting Kelechi Amadi-Obi and other gifted photographers. I was basically a “studio rat” and my responsibility was to do studio visits. That was how I met Kelechi Amadi-Obi whom we used to call “Zulu” and we became friends. Kelechi did a commissioned portrait for the Catholic Church and asked me to add my calligraphy on it; his work was fantastic and had the same effect on me, as mine had on him.

After my IT, I went back to school and finished my Higher National Diploma (HND) and majored in Painting. While there, I would flip through the papers to find upcoming exhibitions with my friend Chuks Okonkwwo. We would plan our visits to Lagos to catch the most exhibitions. I'd budget my money, enter a night bus, and be in Lagos the next day. I'd land at Dolphin studios, -my home then, before heading to Kelechi's studio, then jump on a bus to CMS and find my way to an exhibition.

I heard a lot about Sam Ovrati and how fantastic he was with watercolors. Visiting his exhibition at the Harlequin Gallery in 1998, alongside Abiodun Olaku's solo exhibition at Chattered Bank, Idejo and made huge impact, like a perfect, hi-resolution image. I'd dedicate a week consuming art in Lagos, then head back to school with my imagination fired up. Inspired by my brother, I had strengthened my interest in experimental drawings with a ballpoint pen. I remember our life-drawing sessions, where the lecturer said erasers were not allowed and I loved the challenge.



No More Empty Promises IV,
Ballpoint pen on archival paper 44 x 50 in, 2019

These were some of the experiences which helped expand my horizon.

NI: You started off with graphics and drawings, and later started painting; how has fashion and music, specifically hiphop, influenced your work?

IA: In 2016, I had a show titled *Sélénsé*, which reflected the energy in African and Nigerian fashion. When we look at the streets, they are more or less our fashion runway. People say things non-verbally with what they wear and how they appear. Our environment is more or less status-driven, and we want to show that we've got it going on. *Sélénsé* was me articulating the vibrant, sometimes gaudy nature that fashion is consumed here. I combined the experiences of growing up in Aba, and the current energies I was feeling around me as at the time with regards to fashion... everything came into play.

In terms of the influence of music on my work, I like to take a 360° degree view. Let's say I hear a Tuface or Majek Fashek song, in my mind, I'm hearing "eh- ah eh... brother eh" and I'm wondering what that would look like on canvas? I'm asking myself, what would Ebuka's outfits in the Big Brother reality show look like if they were songs? What if I took a Duke Asidere painting and recreated it into a drama sketch? Though painting and drawing is the major way of expressing myself, I like to imagine things from other perspectives - from music, fashion, dance, and so on.



No More Empty Promises III,

Ballpoint pen on archival paper 44 x 50 in, 2019

NI: Let's come back to this exhibition. How do these major life influences shape this new body of works?

IA: First of all, if you look at all but one of my works, they have some human element in them. In the series titled AMIDST THE NOISE, those figures lean towards an edgy, fashion style. This is me being influenced by pop culture. In the middle of this corona pandemic, Nas dropped his album King's Disease in which a black man is still reminding the world that his life matters. It is very shocking. Nas says "we going ultra black, we don't fold, we don't crack", lyrics that really hit me. My ideas about identity and racism sync with his music. The doodles in the background tap into the fabric and noise of our society, especially looking at Nigerian politics and how it affects us, how the people elected aren't meeting up to our expectations, especially in the health sector. On top of the pandemic, people have to deal with power issues and fuel subsidy and now the protests about police brutality... I am trying to capture all that by saying that in the midst of the noise you're in, don't fold, don't crack, stand strong. My works say, stand strong, stay focused, don't fold, don't bend, stand tall.

NI: Let's talk about Conversations with the Future and the inspiration behind this work.

IA: Conversations with the Future and Reassurance are inspired by talks between my daughter and I; she can ask me a million questions. Because of the pandemic, she can't go to school, she can't see her friends, go to the park, play outside. Having to explain the times we're in was what gave birth to that painting. "Daddy, when do you

think coronavirus will stop?", "Sweetheart, I don't know"; "Are we going to be like this forever?" "No, things will look up, for now, let's just be a happy family that we are, let's just create, look at things we like, and be happy". This is me trying to plant seeds to expand her mind, while we're in darkness. Referencing Nas' collaborative album with Damien Marley, Distant Relatives, there's one of his songs where he says "Your mind is your modern-day spear", which means your mind is your weapon and whoever captures it, captures you. I'm saying look, you need to hold onto faith and look towards the brighter side. You will still experience all the things you want and go to all the places you want, you will still play with and see your friends. This is me trying to guide her mind to be optimistic.

NI: Let's talk about the lockdown. Clearly this body of work was what gave you hope but how did you stay busy? How did you stay sane? What were some challenges or things you engaged with?

IA: This was my first time staying indoors for 2-3 days at a stretch. I was used to going out, running errands, going to the studio and so on. Now you're thinking of how to get those things sorted out without leaving your home. Another challenge was engaging the kids. I had to pack my materials from my studio to my one-room studio at home. Each time I was creating, they wanted to join in. They wanted to make art too and we got to the point where we were dragging over materials. My daughter and son would wake up and tell me "I need acrylics, I need glue" "Daddy look at what I've created, do you like it?" In the middle of when you're thinking about something else, they'd want to get your

assurance on the Spongebob, Squid ward, Mr Crabs or Pearl they painted. It's been a huge blessing because it opened my mind to get into their world. The works in the All Will be Well series were inspired by soaking in family life like a sponge with my son, daughter, and wife.

Another outlet was social media which is like a window through which I can feel the pulse of my audience in Lagos, in the States, and elsewhere. To keep myself busy, I started sketching and a times I'd post a drawing to see how people reacted, and their reactions would feed what I created next. It's like non-verbal communication.

NI: If you had to pick five musical tracks which influenced this exhibition, which would you pick?

IA: Fantastic. Actually, with each body of work, I feel like I'm painting an album. For me, a painting is a song. Like listening to Majek's Holy Spirit and in the part where he adlibs, I experiment with what it would look like. What part of the composition of the painting would it be? Which painting would be track one? Which would be the intro and outro?

So, I'd start with IllBliss, from the album ILLY CHAPO X. The first track is God Made You King which is an assurance that you are who you are, specially and wonderfully made and you've got to stand strong. The second and third tracks would be Nas' Ultrablack and Find Your Wealth (from the QB's Finest collaborative album he created with folks he grew up with in his neighborhood, Queens) where he says "Look way deep inside yourself, discover the diamond

inside, Find Your Wealth!" The fourth track would be Appreciate it by Tuface, where he appreciates everybody, his fans and people he looked up to, when he was climbing the ladder. The fifth track would be a medley of hymns by Gospel singer/preacher Sonnie Badu who I recently re-discovered during this pandemic. His medley starts with Abide with Me and other songs which I cherish so much. The final track would be a split between Nathaniel Bassey - who is a fantastic worship leader - You Are God and Travis Greene's Made a Way. These songs just lift your spirits. I'll also add Tim Godfrey's Nara and You Waited.

NI: That's great. Let's also talk about the dynamics of your relationships. For this solo exhibition, you're having Tony Nsofor and Victor Ehikhamenor write about your work. How have relationships with other artists influenced and inspired your oeuvre.

IA: They say "iron sharpeneth iron". With these guys our similarities and interests draw us together. I like to build on strengths. I like what Tony does. To me, he's a great designer and his color-play, is fantastic. Same as Duke Asidere whose color sense and the way he textures his works and responds to experiences is amazing. Duke has an experience, then goes home, paints a work, and titles it that experience. Those things sink into me. Looking at how Victor unashamedly goes way back to pick an element from his village which pushes him towards his identity is impressive. When you hear me passionately talk about Aba, it's the town that shaped me and what fuels my creativity. I pick aspects from different people and build on our relationship and my work.

NI: So what exactly is this “light that you’re looking toward”s? How do you see the future?

IA: I believe the future is bright, I believe art, whether painting, sculpture, or film, holds the power to rewrite our story as a people. Look at what the music industry has done to the image of Nigeria today, as against twenty or thirty years ago? In the past, if you told an uncle you're studying music, he would encourage you to rather study medicine, law and engineering. When I gained admission to university, my uncle asked me “Why Fine Arts?” I think the future is bright, it all depends on the individual looking inward, like Nas sings, and finding their weapon, their asset, their strength and applying it to changing the narrative. Because at the end of the day we’re all making history. Posterity will either frown or smile at you.

I feel privileged to have been featured in the Artists of Nigeria book by Onyema Offoedu-Okeke. I've had numerous cross-continental visual dialogues on social media, such as with Prof. David Lobenberg in California. I liked how he used watercolors and he liked how I used it as well and an idea came - what if we exchanged images and understudied each other? We painted a series of portraits which we exchanged and they got published in America's watercolor magazine and on some blogs. Years ago, a fashion illustration magazine in the UK approached me for my illustrations so I believe the future is bright. I like to think tomorrow will be better than today regardless of what we're facing.

NI: On a final note, what is your prayer for the art industry?

IA: My prayer is that we sit up and hold our profession in higher regard. I want all the stakeholders - artists, curators, collectors - to take what they're doing more seriously and sit up, myself inclusive. You have some collectors who buy because they have the money, not necessarily because they love the work and then they mishandle it. There should also be a lot more seriousness in documenting what's happening now. This city is too saturated. I think curators need to broaden their search for talent beyond Lagos to include Enugu, Afikpo, Osogbo and other cities that we hardly hear about. There are artists there who are creating genuine, authentic works. We need a lot more spaces where people can go to appreciate art; kudos to SMO, with respect to your approach to putting art in unconventional places for people to easily consume. And we need more structure and areas of specialization so we stop being forced to be a jack-of-all-trades. In this way everyone will be recognized and everyone will get a piece of the cake.

NI: Thank you so much Mr. Ananaba.



A Billion Thoughts,
Acrylics on canvas, 30 x 30 in, 2020



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

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



Daily Bread II,

Oil on Canvas, 24 x 30 in, 2019



The Wheatbaker has keenly supported Nigerian arts and culture since opening its doors in 2011. The hotel's commitment to celebrating the best of Nigerian creativity saw it dedicate its walls to showcasing exceptional traditional, modern and contemporary art. The Wheatbaker has hosted world class art exhibitions including the *Collectors' Series* (2011), *Making History* (2012), *Recent sculptures* (2012), the *WW Independence Series* (2012-13), *Flow, Here & There* (2013), photography by Lakin Ogunbanwo, *Duality, Unfurling*, (2014), *Eko Moves* (2014), *AKALAKA, The Contemporaries, Save Our Art! Save our Heritage!*, (2015-2016), *Equal Rights, Evolving Currents, Mental Space, Freedom* (2016), *Permutations, Standing Out II, Wanderlust* (2017), *The Wheatbaker Permanent Collection* (2017-18), *GBAM!*, *The Contemporaries II* (2018), *Recent Works, Eni! You Can Always Tell Where The Elephant Has Passed By, If Walls Could Speak and Convergence* (2019), *Dis Lagos Life* (2020)



All Will Be Well IX,
Acrylics on canvas, 30 x 30 in, 2020



Louis Guntrum was established in 1648, and eleven generations later, Louis Konstantin Guntrum has elevated the wines to fresh new heights. With their commitment to artistry, tradition and excellence, the Guntrum family is proud to introduce these new wines that represent the tradition and vision of a rich wine-making legacy in Germany's Rhine valley.

Louis Guntrum award winning wines are enjoyed in over 80 countries worldwide. A newcomer in the Nigerian market, Guntrum wine is pleased to support African creativity.

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