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OCULA REPORT

ART X Lagos: Nigeria's Art Renaissance

Jareh Das | Lagos | 17 November 2018



Exhibition view: Signature Beyond Art Gallery, ART X Lagos (3–4 November 2018). Courtesy ART X Lagos.

Nigeria's art scene has flourished over the last decade, leading to a renewed interest in cultivating and supporting modern and contemporary art in the country. Ranked Africa's largest economy in 2017, making up 0.8 percent of the world's GDP, a surge in wealth amongst some individuals has led to a developing collector base (not to mention rising challenges dealing with income inequality across the country). Lagos, Africa's most populous city, is now staking a claim globally as a contemporary art destination—a status that was re-enforced with the founding in 2016 of the ART X Lagos fair, the first commercial fair of its kind in West Africa, whose third edition took place between 3 and 4 November 2018 in the city's Civic Centre in the affluent district of Victoria Island.



Works by Na Chainkua Reindorf and Patrick Tagoe-Turkson on view at Nubuke Foundation, ART X Lagos (3–4 November 2018). Courtesy ART X Lagos.

To understand the renaissance of Nigeria's art scene, it is important to highlight the groundwork that was carried out by individuals who initiated a 'contemporary art evangelism' in a country where governmental support for the arts is largely non-existent.

In 2007, for example, Bisi Silva established the non-profit Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) in Lagos to address the need for intellectual and rigorous scholarship on contemporary West African art, as exemplified by the Centre's Àsìkò Art School—an innovative programme that responds to the region's tendency to 'ignore critical methodologies and histories that underpin artistic practice.' The organisation's critical and research-driven approach has been a driving force in Lagos's

contemporary art scene, and Silva has brought visibility to the overlooked practices of many contemporary Nigerian artists, most notably renewing interest in the importance, influence, and contribution of photographer J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere through an exhibition (*Moments of Beauty*, 15 April–27 November 2011) and scholarly publication of the artist's vast archive, which spans over six decades.

Azu Nwagbogu, who was recently appointed chief curator of Cape Town's Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art, has established two platforms that contribute to the development and support of Nigerian artists: the African Artists' Foundation (AAF) and LagosPhoto Festival. Launched in 2010, LagosPhoto Festival enables dialogue between local and international photographers through an annual, month-long programme of exhibitions, competitions, and workshops.



Exhibition view: Art House – The Space, ART X Lagos (3–4 November 2018). Courtesy ART X Lagos.

On the commercial side, Ayo Adeyinka of TAFETA gallery and Kavita Chellaram of Arthouse Contemporary have contributed to building a local and international collector base as contemporary African artists have increasingly garnered international acclaim and commanded soaring auction prices. Arthouse Contemporary draws attention to the scope of West African art, whilst TAFETA functions in an advisory-sales capacity for important private and corporate modern and contemporary African art collectors.

In 2017, Nigeria debuted its first-ever national pavilion at the 57th– Venice Biennale, curated by Rele Art Gallery's founder Adenrele Sonariwo, with the 56th edition curated by Okwui Enwezor. All of these factors have led to a renewed interest within and outside of the country, leading to the emergence of more galleries and art spaces, particularly in Lagos.



Soji Adesina, *Kudi in the Garden* (2018). Exhibition view: Bloom Art, ART X Lagos (3–4 November 2018). Courtesy ART X Lagos.

Over the last few weeks, cultural activity in Lagos has been at its most intense. This year's LagosPhoto Festival (27 October–15 November) was preceded by Lagos Fashion Week (24–27 October 2018), while Art Summit Nigeria made its debut on 30 and 31 October with a focus on the future of art in the country.

All of these events made for an engaging lead-up to the third edition of ART X Lagos and its collateral ART X Week events, which included a visit to *Layers of Time and Place: What Lies Beneath*, a solo exhibition of works by Abraham Oghobase at Art Twenty One (30 October–7 November 2018). The exhibition draws inspiration from the artist's first visit to Jos, a city in the Middle Belt of Nigeria defined by grasslands, historic rock formations, and a unique mountainous terrain. Oghobase reflects on this landscape through digitally manipulated photographs from British colonial history, the city's mining industry, portraits of townspeople, and installations mimicking natural rock formations.



Exhibition view: Abraham Oghobase, *Layers of Time and Place: What Lies Beneath*, Art Twenty One, Lagos (30 October–7 November 2018). Courtesy Art Twenty One.

Elsewhere, Johannesburg-based gallery Stevenson's collaboration with ALÁRA manifested as a month-long temporary exhibition at the concept store, whilst artist-run spaces Revolving Art Incubator and The Treehouse offered grassroots perspectives of art in the city. Stevenson's group exhibition on the top floor of the stunning David Adjaye-designed ALÁRA store included works by Viviane Sassen, Kemang Wa Lehulere, Yadichinma Ukoha-Kalu, Deborah Poynton, and Barthélémy Toguo. Ukoha-Kalu is a multidisciplinary Nigerian artist who explores abstraction across painting, drawing, and installation. Her painting *Fruit of My Labour I* (2017) stood out for its striking abstract motifs experimenting with line, form, and perspective.

Another highlight of the collateral events was SMO Contemporary Art's solo exhibition of work by important Nigerian modernist master, Oseloka Osadebe. Osadebe was a member of Zaria Rebels, an artist group founded in 1958 that aimed to establish a post-independence language of African art to restore the erasures of tradition as a result of colonialism.



Works by Armand Boua on view at SMO Contemporary Art, ART X Lagos (3–4 November 2018). Courtesy ART X Lagos.

Founded in 2016 by entrepreneur and businesswoman Tokini Peterside, ART X Lagos included 18 local and international galleries this year, showing works by African and diaspora artists, alongside a programme of talks, special projects, and collateral events. Nigerian galleries included Arthouse Contemporary's satellite initiative, Arthouse – The Space, Artyrama, Nike Art Gallery, Bloom Art, Retro Africa, Signature Beyond Art Gallery, SMO Contemporary Art, and Thought Pyramid Art Centre. Galleries from further afield included Addis Fine Art (Ethiopia), Afriart Gallery (Uganda), Circle Art Agency (Kenya), Gallery 1957 (Ghana), Nubuke Foundation (Ghana), SMAC Gallery (South Africa), Stevenson (South Africa), Out of Africa Gallery (Spain), TAFETA (UK), and Tiwani Contemporary (UK).



Works by Cyrus Kabiru on view at SMAC Gallery, ART X Lagos (3–4 November 2018). Courtesy ART X Lagos.

Painting, photography, and sculpture were dominant throughout, with few challenging works; nevertheless, standout booths could still be found. SMAC Gallery's rumoured sold-out booth included afro-futurist eyewear by Cyrus Kabiru and their accompanying large-scale portraits, which capture the artist wearing the DIY creations. Nearby, Nubuke Foundation showed unique knitted sculptures by Na Chainkua Reindorf—*Big Mouth* (2018), *Follow Me* (2018), and *Dance* (2018)—all made from bright strips of cotton and wire mesh.

London-based Tiwani Contemporary paired with Stevenson to present an all-female booth consisting of a new, untitled painting by Nigerian artist, Joy Labinjo; alongside new and recent works by Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum and Ruby Onyinyechi Amanze, and a humorous mixed media collage titled *Carpe DM* (2018) by Dada Khanyisa, which reflects on the intersection of technology and black experience.



Dada Khanyisa, *Carpe DM* (2018). Mixed media. 35 x 28 x 8 cm. Courtesy the artist and Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg.

Situated in the Civic Centre's riverfront area was the first of two interactive projects in the form of a new mixed media installation titled *Lagos Drawings* (2018) by Karo Akpokiere, created in collaboration with digital technologist, Desmond Okeke and musician, G.rizo. The conductive installation consisted of four canvases that emitted sounds of the city when touched, thus bringing Akpokiere's comic strip depictions to life. In the Centre's reception area, visitors were invited to view Ben Enwonwu's *Tutu* (1974). Dubbed 'the African Mona Lisa', the painting was presumed lost for almost 40 years until it resurfaced in a London apartment and smashed the artist's auction records earlier this year, selling for £1.2 million.



Ben Enwonwu, *Tutu* (1974). Exhibition view: ART X Lagos (3–4 November 2018). Courtesy ART X Lagos.

A short distance from Enwonwu's painting was the fair's 2018 'Curated Project', which focused on British-Nigerian YBA star, Yinka Shonibare MBE. The presentation included the artist's seminal public sculptures, films, and documentation of his process through photographs, documentary footage, and maquettes for key works including *The Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996–1997), *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Africa)* (2018), and the monumental fibreglass *Wind Sculpture (SG) I* (2018) shown at the Doris C. Freedman Plaza in New York earlier this year.

This year's ART X Talks were held on the fair's first floor and focused on current practices, trends, and accessibility to contemporary art on the continent. Speakers including Jahman Oladejo Anikulapo (Arts & Culture Communicator), Professor Chike Aniakor (Artist and Art Historian) and Iheanyi Onwuegbucha (Associate Curator, CCA, Lagos) discussed Nigeria's pioneering publishing industry between the 1960s and 90s; while Malian artist Aboubakar Fofana focused his talk *Aboubakar Fofana on Usable Pasts & Re-invention* on how his practice redefines West African indigo dyeing techniques.

In the foyer of the first floor, outside the talks space, an immersive installation by Bolatito Aderemi-Ibitola, the winner of the 2018 ART X Prize with Access, was displayed. Titled *Scraps from Mama's Floor* (2018), the installation consists of a digitally interactive screen inspired by Aderemi-Ibitola's childhood experience of watching her mother make clothes out of scraps of fabric for her and her siblings.



Bolatito Aderemi-Ibitola, *Scraps from Mama's Floor* (2018). Exhibition view: ART X Lagos (3–4 November 2018). Courtesy the artist.

The second interactive project, located in the foyer of the second floor before the main galleries section, was Olalekan Jeyifous and Wale Lawal's installation *Mad Horse City* (2018) that reimagines Lagos in the year 2115 and consisted of a graphic novella, a series of vignettes, and an adjacent room where visitors could experience this vision of the city via virtual reality.



Performance by BOJ at ART X Live, ART X Lagos (3–4 November 2018). Courtesy ART X Lagos.

On Saturday night, ART X Live! showcased performances by BOJ, Teni the Entertainer, and Ghanaian singer, Amaarae—transforming the Civic Centre carpark into a late-night rave with a diverse crowd. Still, despite such gestures towards contemporaneity, it remains to be seen as to how ART X Lagos can maintain and evolve its current role as a catalyst for contemporary art in Nigeria while garnering momentum throughout the West African region. Throughout the week, I heard repeated comments on the lack of governmental support and educational resources for art in Nigeria, alongside concerns of a lack of experimentation, risk-taking, and criticality by a younger generation. That being said, many of these comments were made by a generation of artists that are currently emerging, and who will no doubt contribute to the transformation of the scene. —[O]