

DIFFUSION

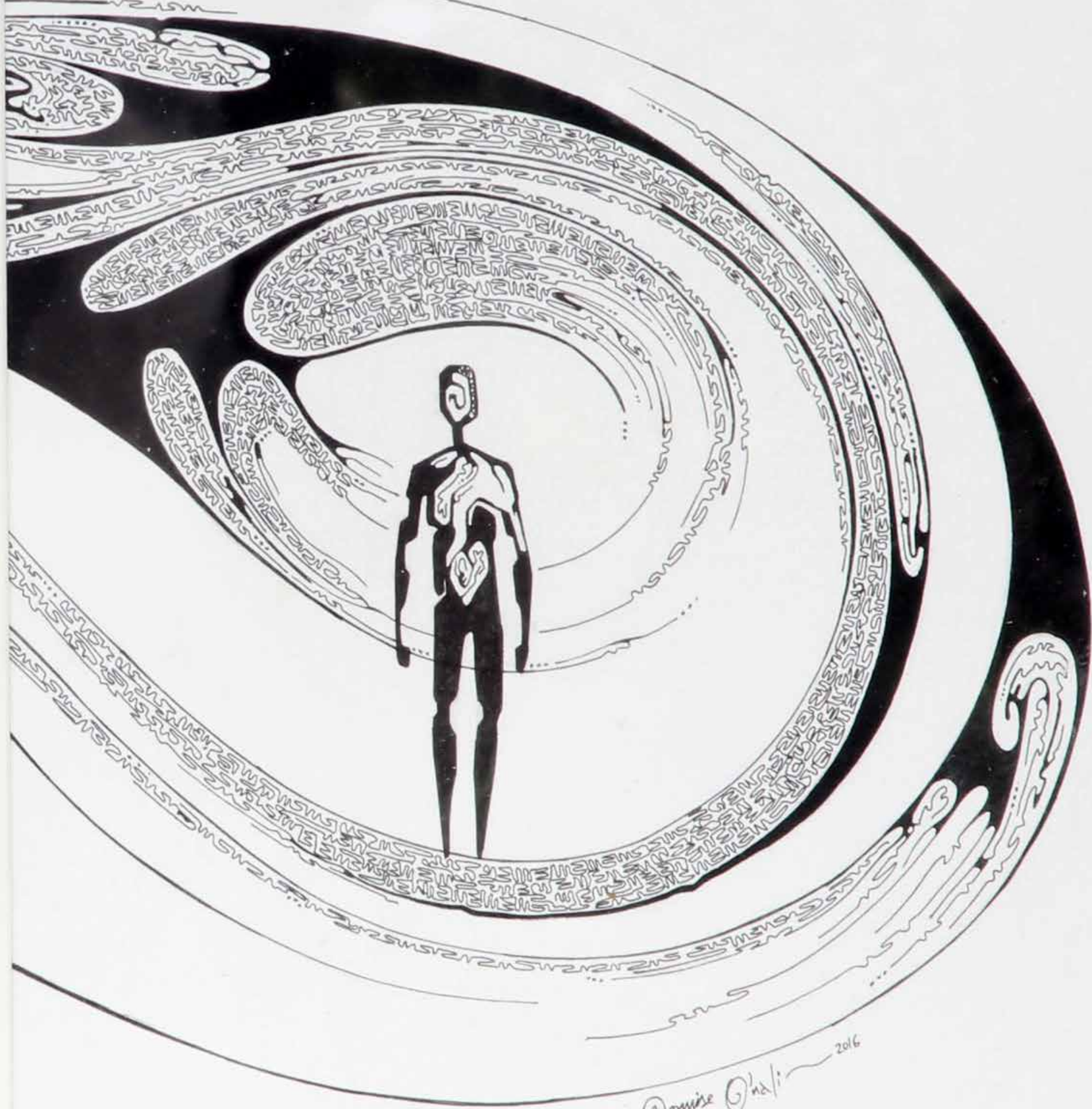


Chibuiké **UZOMA**

Promise **O'NALI**



Portrait of a Man



... Promise O'Neil 2016



DIFFUSION

Chibuike Uzoma
Promise O'nali

curated by Sandra Mbanefo Obiago





March 30 - May 17, 2019

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Fusion in Diffusion

Chibuike Uzoma and Promise O'nali's works speak from opposite ends of the art spectrum. There is a powerful diffusion of ideas and light in their paintings. Both artists emit a strong surge of energy, a deep questioning of the meaning of consciousness, history, evolution of matter and thought.

Uzoma's powerful abstract emotional statements are a total opposite to O'nali's measured, thoughtful, perfectly circular style and character. In Diffusion we have an attraction of opposites, of youthful exuberance and intellectual triple jump vis-à-vis a more mature, perfectly aligned cruising linearity which seeks answers in crystal clear lines of argument.

On interviewing the artists, I found out that they had been friends for years. Both grew up in Port Harcourt and attended the same secondary school, even though ten years apart. Both are kindred spirits, deeply respectful of each other's totally different creative energy, which provides a rich

terrain for the intellectual and creative questioning that fuels their friendship.

In exploring the meaning of diffusion in their work, it is interesting to see a congruity in their thinking expressed in such diametrically different ways. O'nali looks at life through a scientific lens, and creates works which mirror his fascination with how the most minuscule elements of matter are drawn by a centrifugal force to create life and thought. This universal evolutionary pull is influenced by years of reading science fiction literature which draws out clear color, lines and forms from his palette and mental journeying.

O'nali's diffusion of creative energy is inspired by imagining far flung galaxies and thinking about the effects of climate change and our destruction of nature's fragile web of life, and its effect on our physical, emotional and spiritual well being. Inspired by philosophy and world religions, O'nali presents his cosmos through embryonic forms floating above crested waves, neatly

intertwined with human forms and faces which he renders with subtle layers of diverse mesh materials such as lace, gauze, wire, and string to represent the complexity of existence. In some of his works, we almost feel like a surgeon contemplating the human body peering through layers of tissue to reveal a complex core of meaning and brain swirls.

In O'nali's intricate pen and ink drawings, we see a talented draughtsman, drawing spheres of layered consciousness within swirls of mind-bubbles, drawing on a rich history of style rooted in both the uli tradition with influences from the Osogbo sacred art school.

In contrast, Uzoma's diffusion is rooted in a much more emotional landscape charged with intellectual curiosity. His works reflect an artist whose deeply passionate approach to painting is fueled by the writings of political thought leaders like Frantz Fanon. Uzoma's works question conflict and socio-economic inequities by exploring history, current events, and literature including allusions to Nigerian classics written by Chinua Achebe.

Uzoma's intimate portraits of his mother and friends are blurred with color splashes and smears across faces, hiding subtle and deeply sensitive realities and complex relationships. In his almost monochromatic confessional series,

Uzoma sketches faces covered by minuscule text, chronicling conversations he has had with the subject of each portrait, exploring their understanding of the fall and redemption of the human spirit. In his perfect punishment series, Uzoma's aqua-marine collage portraits are ripped and layered with newspaper print and written lines from school text-books, exploring the meaning of social justice and equity in a predominantly blue landscape.

On closer scrutiny, Uzoma's large canvases reveal layered conversations, arguments and self-portraits which he paints with colorful energetic abandonment. His bright bold abstract surfaces are punctuated by a critical analysis of the transience and complexity of relationships. "I try to make images that express the basic and necessary elements of human experience: freedom, love, joy, possibility, hope, and even tragedy," he explains.

Diffusion therefore presents a wonderful platform for both O'nali and Uzoma to express and explore the evolution of consciousness from different vantage points: star gazer meeting color cowboy.

We are grateful to Prof. Frank Ugiomoh and Oliver Enwonwu for their thoughtful essays having known both artists for years and supported their artistic journey.

Huge appreciation to Avi and

Kabir Wadhvani, the founders of Temple Muse, for allowing SMO to constantly push the artistic boundaries in their beautiful, serene oasis. Sincere thanks to Veuve Clicquot for their long standing support of our exhibitions.

Sincere appreciation to my team, Nneoma, Moni and Majid, for faithfully laying the ground work of each of our shows, and putting up with my emails and whatsapp messages that fly incessantly through space at any time of day and night, questioning and pushing for more.

And finally a very sincere and heartfelt thank you to both O'nali and Uzoma for being open and adventurous, and starting our exhibition year with a power surge of colorful exploration into the meaning and depth of our consciousness.

We hope you enjoy Diffusion, and that it lights up great conversation and fuels our creative hunger.

Sandra Mbanefo Obiako
Curator





Diffusion: A State of Becoming

Connoting abstraction, movement across boundaries, time and space, Mariam Webster defines diffusion “as the state of being spread out or transmitted especially by contact”, and the action of diffusing (transitive verb) as “to pour out and permit or cause to spread freely”. As the title for this exhibition of recent works by Promise O’nali (b.1982) and Chibuike Uzoma (b.1992), two exciting names on the Lagos contemporary art scene, Diffusion becomes apt and embracing because it alludes to the strikingly contrasting pictorial modes and approaches adopted by each artist but is also a platform to examine points of conflation and divergence of their separate trajectories and overall thrusts as exemplified in 45 works of varying media.

O’nali is already well known for his strongly individualistic style that has roots in uli, the ancient system of Igbo painting. His 29 drawings and paintings including 2 diptychs presented here, recall vaguely, the poetic lyricism of the uli tradition pioneered by such figures as Uche

Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu and Chike Aniakor, and betray his links to the University of Nsukka, where he studied painting (2007).

Promise O’nali’s visual idiom and mastery of his media is evident in his keen sense of design and composition which imbue his work with character. He chooses a subdued palette and though his lines are considerably thickened, he retains much of the sensitivity, expressiveness and gestural elegance of those of his forebears. The strength of his lines however, lies in their uniformity. Fluid and curvilinear, they meander, developing ultimately into a complex system of ovoids, which at once serve metaphorically as the linear progression of birth, life and decay.

The artist’s indebtedness to science is also apparent in the convoluted arrangement of his lines to mimic the folds and grooves of the human cerebral cortex. O’nali’s two-pronged approach here is incisive. First, allusions to the brain signify the importance of family

to our stability, consciousness and thoughts. Second, clustered masses are separated, often cocooned in even larger ovoid shapes that bear strong semblance to the morphology of a sperm—an important determinant of its efficiency — a quality that lends substance to the artist's subtle interrogation of the concept of human evolution. Indeed, his continuing research into the formation of cells, skin tissue and embryo draws parallels with our social-political, cultural and economic survival amidst the increasing impact of globalisation.

Sometimes, these masses are suspended in ambient space, achieving a fine balance with the negative areas in ensuring that the spatial dynamics of both the positive and negative are organic. At other times, O'nali situates them in a white empty surround within the cranium — their local and primary context — or employs them in embellishing the human form including expectant mothers, trees and vegetation, foregrounds and skies. Added to this drama are pictorial devices like houses that represent shelter and communal living. These evolving embryos or bubbles are symbolic of the state of consciousness of every individual, family, community and the country at large. According to O'nali: "We always find ourselves in these bubbles we have created and it influences the way we interact with other people and handle sensitive

situations." In his more recent experiments to suggest movement and the passage of fire, the artist appropriates such unconventional media as wire gauze, metal, fabric, polystyrene and wood — mostly recycled and found materials storing personal histories and Africa's shared experiences with the West. All together visually poetic, these various elements become powerful vehicles for social commentary.

In O'nali's work, the mind, spirit and body are welded and inseparable. Unlike many contemporary artists that through the body, address the dearth of images of Blacks in Western art, female sexual pleasure, and historical stereotypes of servant, slave, prostitute or exotic savage, O'nali is chiefly concerned with motherhood and family roles, as well as the peaceful co-existence of ordinary people.

In remarkable contrast to Promise O'nali's careful and controlled manner, Chibuikwe Uzoma is spontaneous and animated. Portraying narratives that modify common understandings of places and people, Uzoma draws from Nigeria, the African diaspora and the Global South to engage issues of contemporary politics, post-colonialism, migration, popular culture and other things related to religious and ethnic conflicts. His art may thus be described as a quest to discover his empirical truth. He studied painting at the

University of Benin (2013) but today his multidisciplinary practice also encompasses photography and drawing. His imagined world often peopled with strangely hybrid beings represents the shifting identities and influences in his life.

This recurring motif of nonconformist and anarchic bodies are another form of the grotesque that defy the classical image of perfection. According to critic Sally Banes, who writes about dance and performance: "the classical body is smooth, finished, closed and complete in contrast to the grotesque body, which is rough, uneven, unfinished, open and full of apertures". Art historians Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel also assert: "The grotesque body is marked by time and life events. Although disagreeable, embarrassing and even offensive to some, grotesque bodies assert the corporeal existence of the body and its mortality. Moreover, by transgressing acceptable boundaries of appearance and behaviour, grotesque bodies subvert and resist social practices that tend to suppress individual differences or constrain freedom of expression." Indeed, Uzoma's constructions resist social practices through the objection one feels when confronted with them. At the same time, they serve a valuable purpose in making us confront our corporeality and fragile existence in a world of constant flux. "I try to make images that express the

basic and necessary elements of human experience: freedom, love, joy, possibility, hope, and even tragedy."

Exhibiting a heightened technical facility, Chibuïke Uzoma invites meditative contemplation, spiritual reflection and transcendence in his works with the inclusion of abstract passages to accentuate his focus on time. His vibrant colours and free-form shapes, as well as bold vertical and diagonal lines reminiscent of Francis Bacon, frame an ambiguous world appropriate for his spiritual message. Amplifying this scenario is a collage of newspaper cuttings, with engaging text that explore the themes of memory and history. As Anne Morgan explained, "the potential for artwork to manifest some form of mystical communication that transcends our ordinary reality is great."

Undeniably, Chibuïke Uzoma's art is an excellent example of how thematic content is inextricably linked to form. He draws viewers into a realm of the transformative but eternal. A dense pattern of cones and floating particles convey a sense of timelessness and infinite space. Successfully over-whelming the senses, they submerge us in a dreamlike consciousness and hallucinatory state.

Strongly differing in technique, visual vocabulary and the formal qualities of their oeuvre, Promise O'nali and Chibuike Uzoma are generally inspired by the fabric of everyday life and the relationship between humans and their immediate environment. This affirmation is central to the theme of the exhibition 'Diffusion'. In the ensuing dialogue, cross-fertilisation and transmission of ideas and analyses, both artists do well in providing fresh perspectives and further insight to subsisting questions that have daunted several generations of man: How does our consciousness evolve in time and space? How are individual and communal identities shaped by history, as well as forged by politics and socio-cultural practices?

Oliver Enwonwu, MA Art History
President, Society of Nigerian Artists
Lagos, March 2019



Chibuike **UZOMA**





Chibuiké Uzoma (b. 1992) is a multidisciplinary artist who works with painting, photography, drawing, and text. He graduated from the University of Benin in 2013 with a major in painting and has taken part in projects, exhibitions, and artist residencies in Nigeria, South Africa, Vienna, France, India, and the United States; he begins his Master's of Fine Arts degree at Yale University later this year. Uzoma references contemporary politics in Africa and the Diaspora and questions popular culture against the backdrop of religious and ethnic conflict. By asking "maybe we know nothing?" Uzoma creates visual poetry which reflects our universal struggle with identity in a fast changing universe.



Coloured Girl By The Corner, Oil stick on canvas, 2018, 137 x 106.5 cm

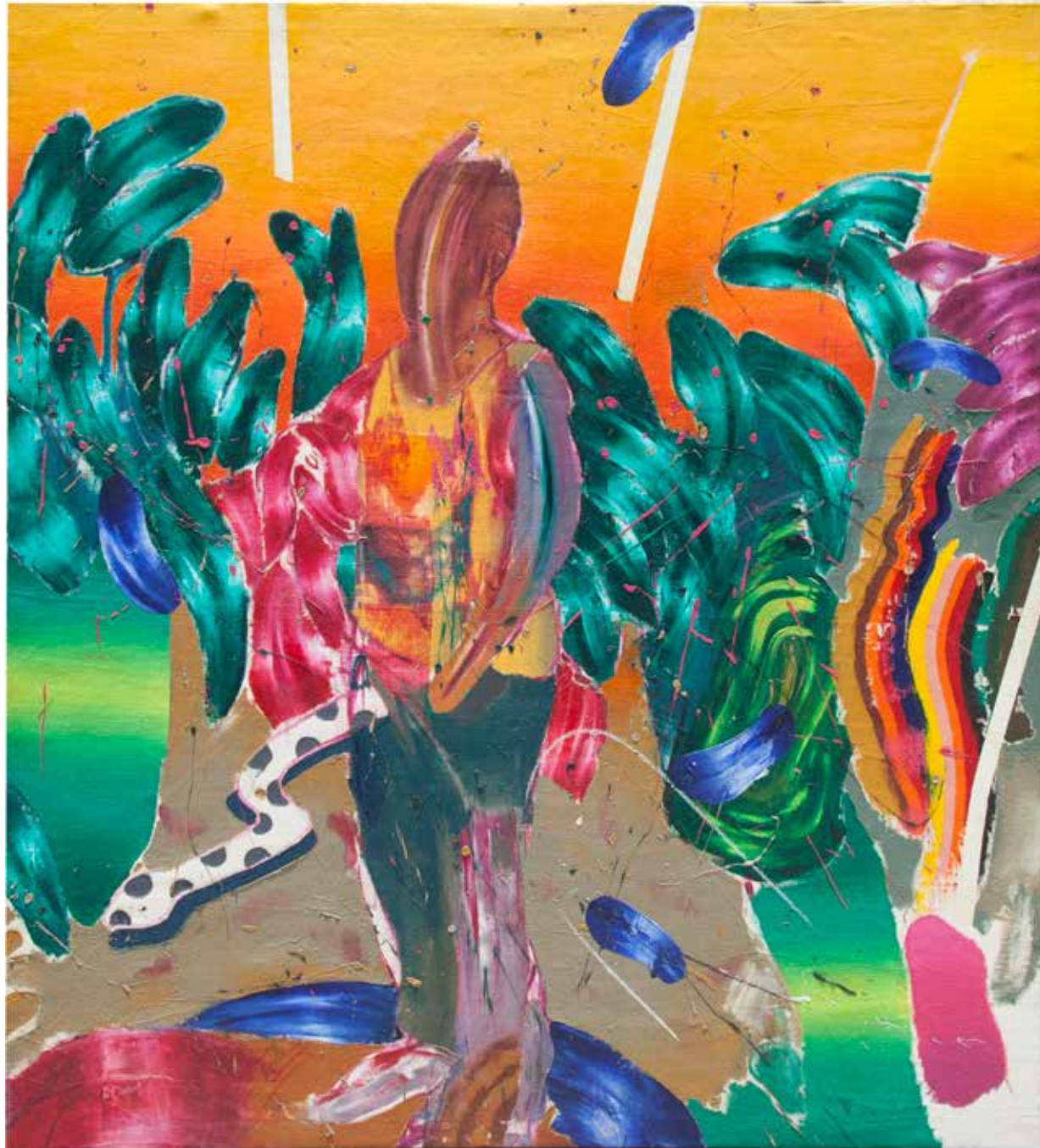


Evening Bloom, Oil, spray paint on canvas, 2018, 152 x 137 cm



Graphic Violence, Oil, oil stick, spray paint on canvas, 2018, 152 x 137 cm





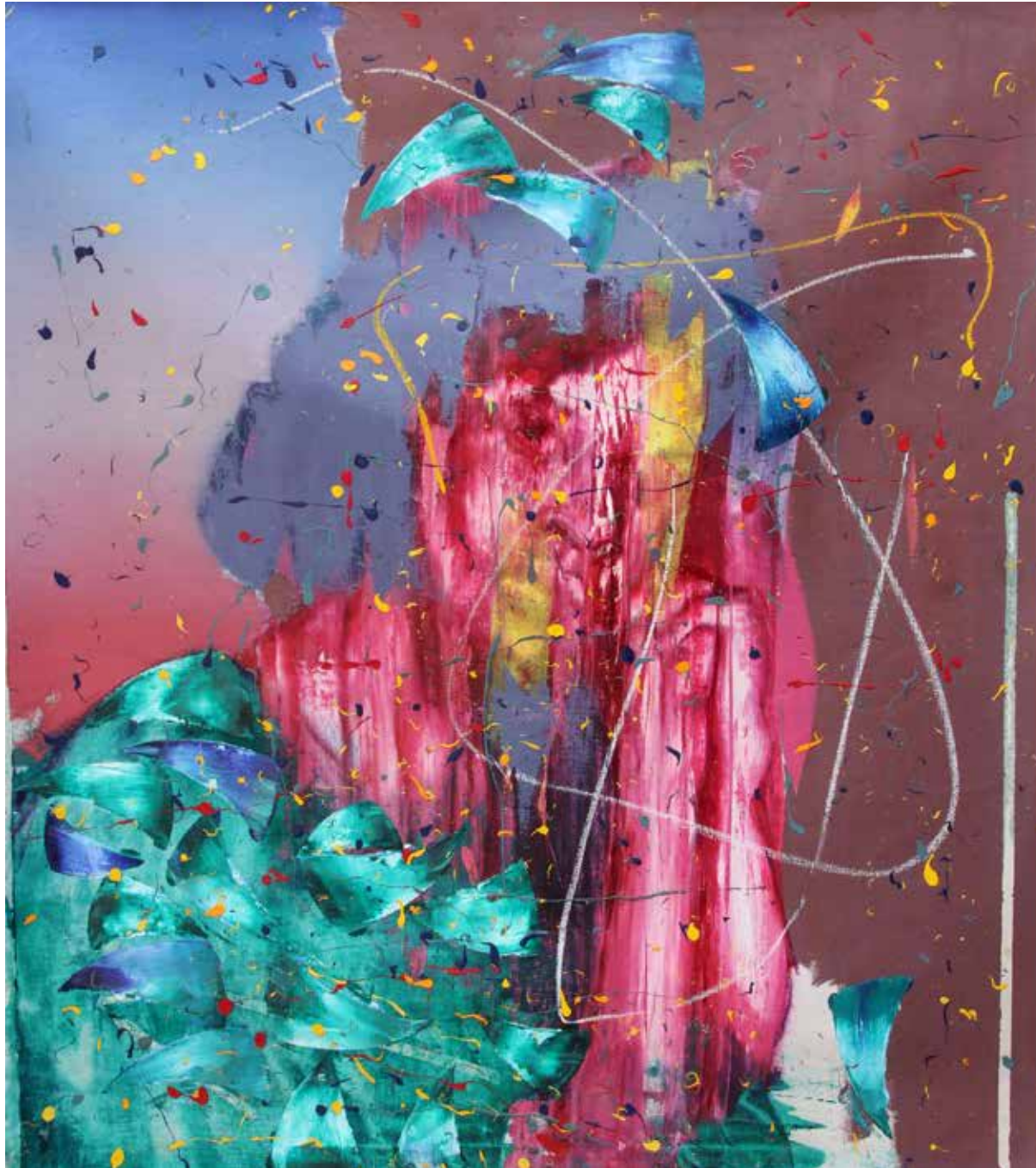
Kid II (Self Portrait), Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2018, 152 x 137 cm



Kid I (Self Portrait), Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2017, 61cm x 137cm x 152cm (Diptych)



In Loving Memory (Late Mrs. Oghobase), Oil on canvas, 2018, 121 x 106.5 cm



Ma (Portrait of My Mother As a Spinster), Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2018, 121 x 106.5 cm



Poppy (Portrait of Liza), Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2017, 45cm x 91cm x102cm (Diptych)



In Immaculata's Blouse (Self Portrait), Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2017, 81 x 66 cm



"In my paintings, I do not aim to imitate reality; instead, I want to compress, concentrate, and confine reality within a work. This means that my paintings are mostly fictions that embody daily situations and encounters. Rather than focusing on a theme, narrative, or so-called style, I try to make images that express the basic and necessary elements of human experience: freedom, love, joy, possibility, hope, and even tragedy."

Chibuïke Uzoma



Dolphin, Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2018, 137 x 106.5 cm



The World Is Yours, Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2017, 137 x 106.5 cm



No Longer At Ease, Oil, oil stick, spray paint on canvas, 2018, 152 x 137 cm

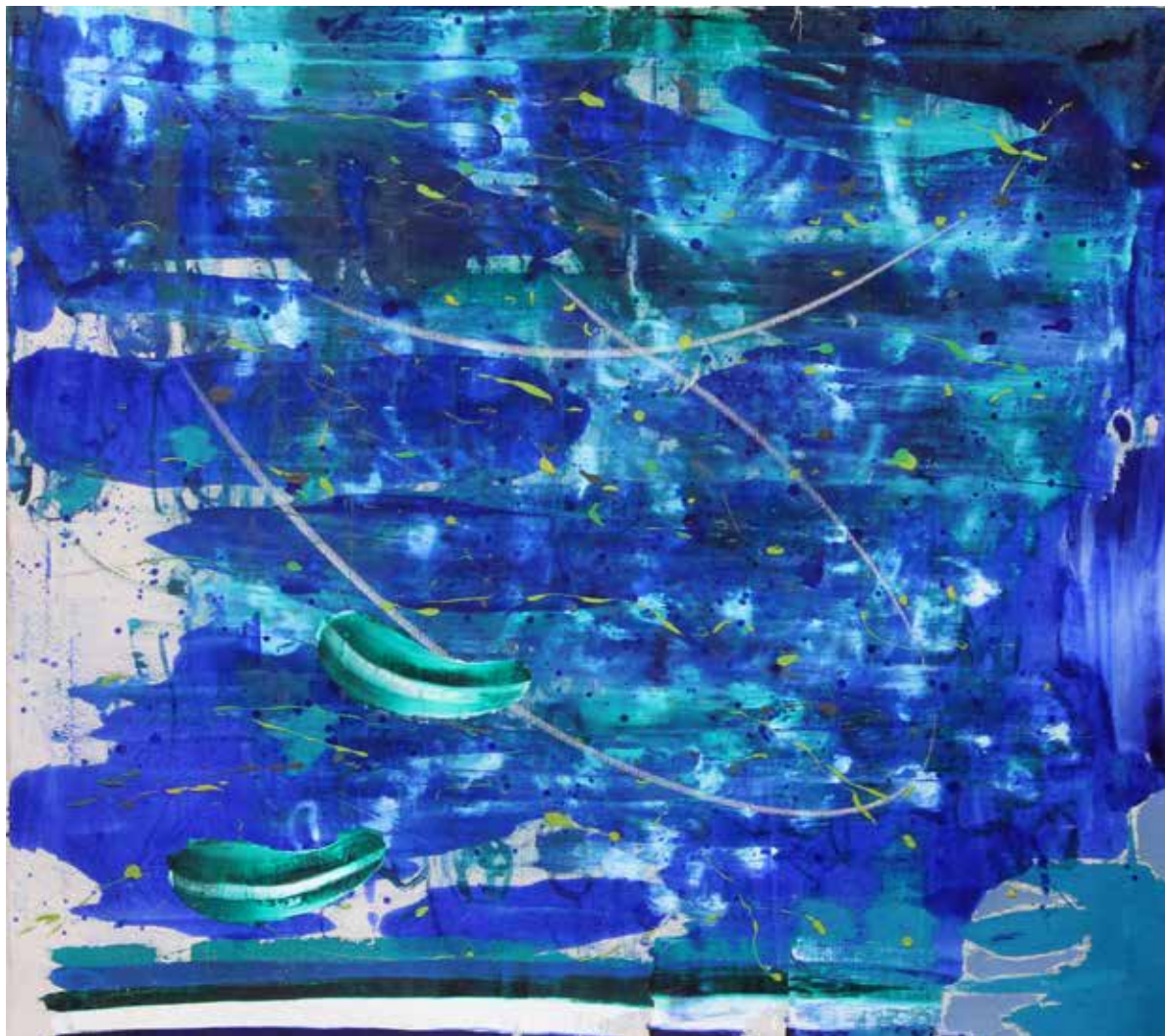


Untitled (Lion And Horse), Oil, oil stick, spray paint on canvas, 2018, 152 x 137 cm

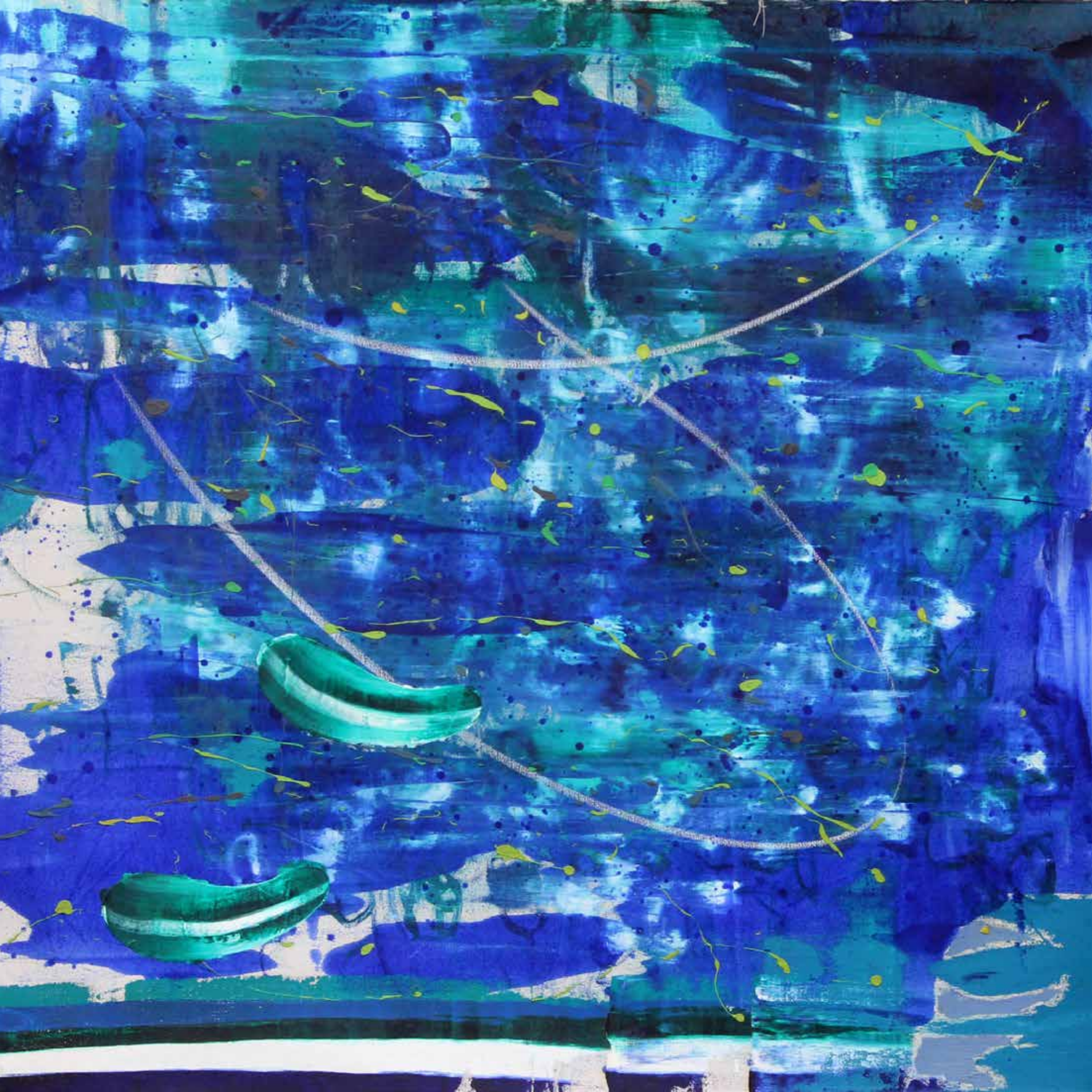


Graphic Violence, Oil, oil stick, spray paint on canvas, 2018, 152 x 137 cm





Congregation, Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2018, 45cm x 91cm x102cm (Diptych)





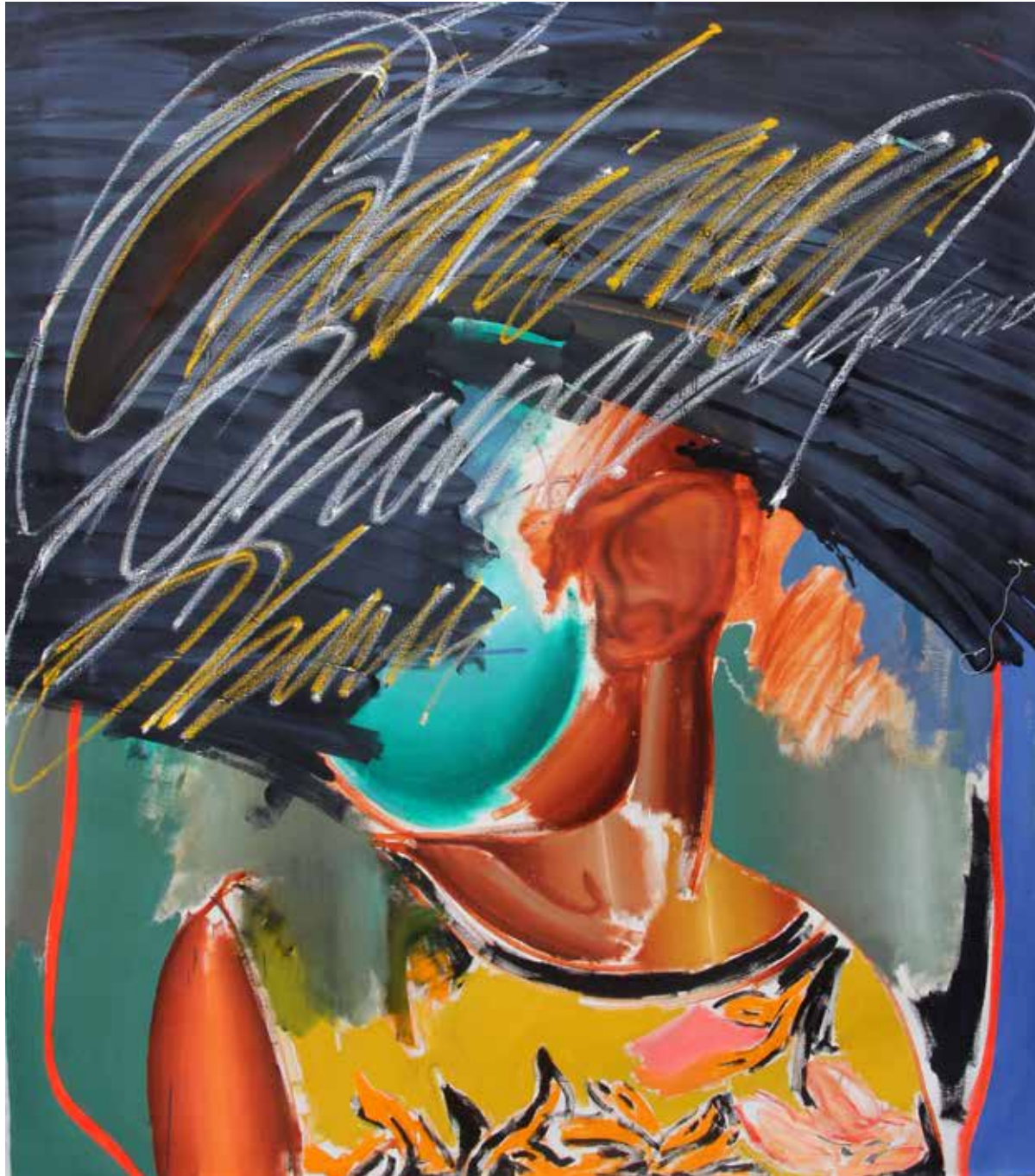
Mad Money I (Obedience), Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2017, 61cm x 137cm x152cm (Diptych)



Mad Money II (Obedience), Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2017, 61cm x 137cm x152cm (Diptych)



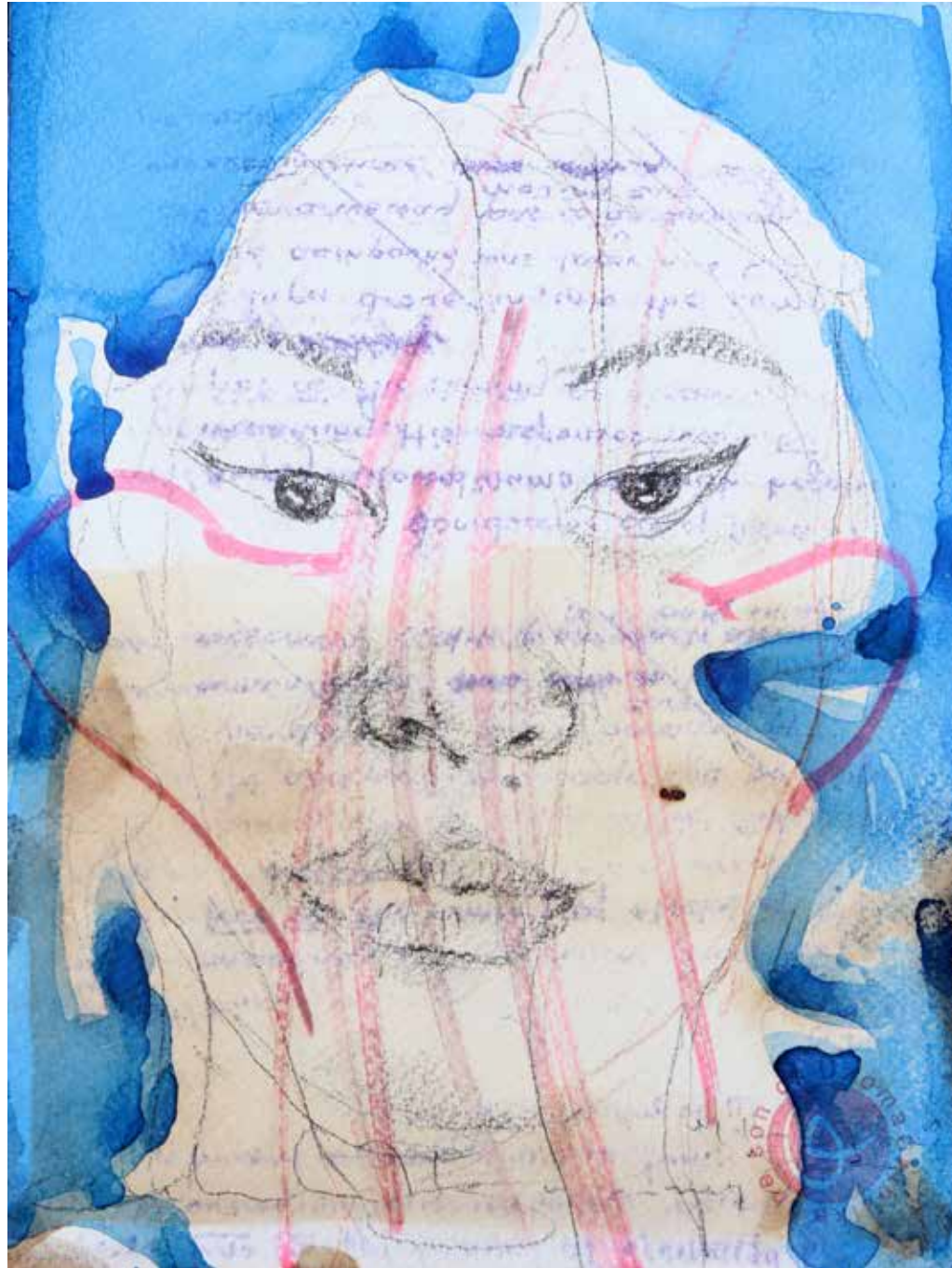
Distress Topics (Obedience), Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2017, 137cm x106.5cm



Things Fall Apart, Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2017, 121 x 106.5 cm



Untitled -Perfect Punishment (I-III), Oil, oil stick, news print, book on strawboard paper, 2018, 42.5 x 31cm (each)



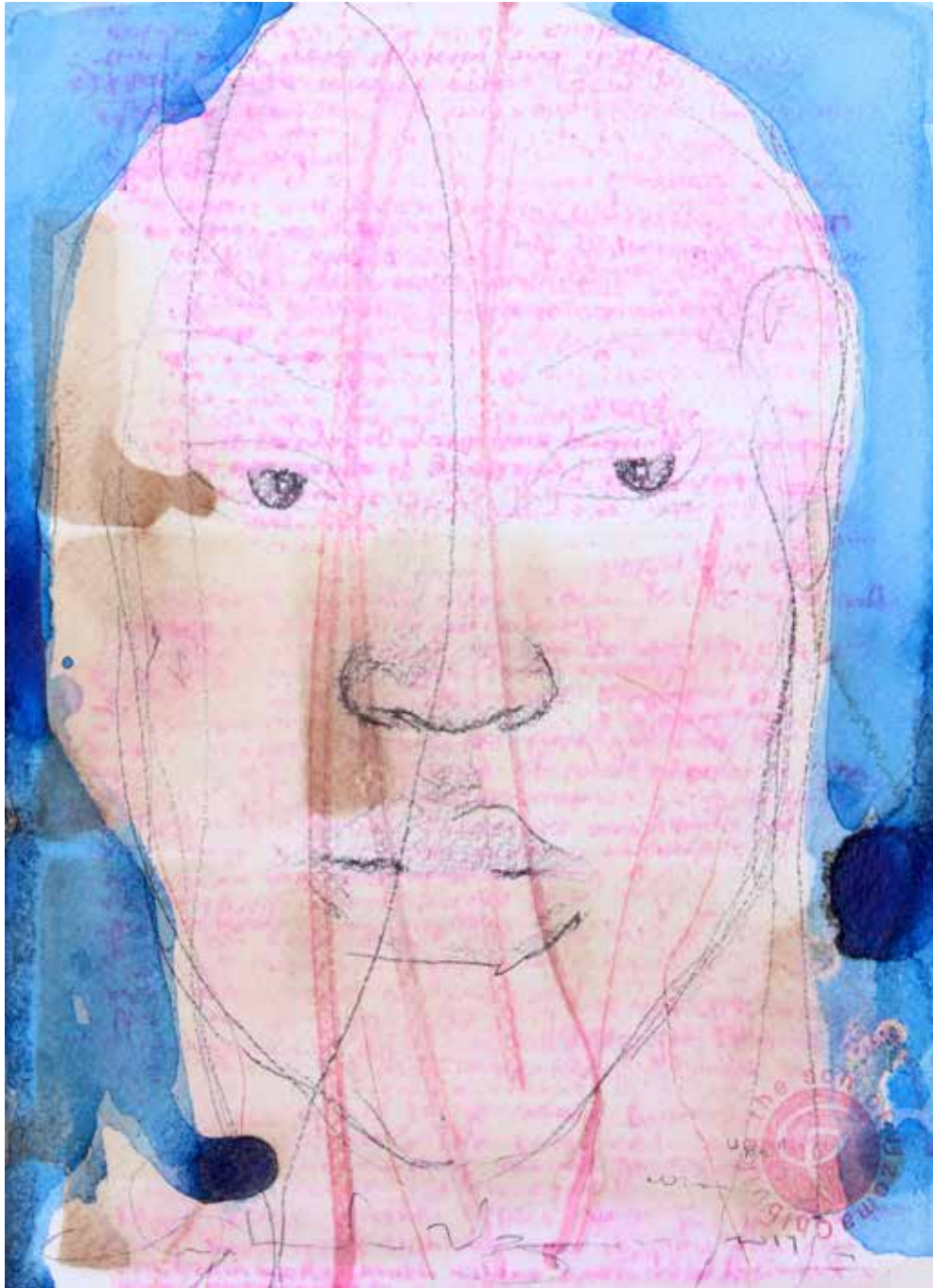
Untitled - Did You Sin Last Week I, 2018, 24 x 18cm



Untitled - Did You Sin Last Week II, 2018, 24 x 18cm



Untitled - Did You Sin Last Week III, 2018, 24 x 18cm



Untitled - Did You Sin Last Week IV, 2018, 24 x 18cm



CV

CHIBUIKE ANSELEM UZOMA

EDUCATION:

- 2013** Bachelor of Arts (B. A.) Visual Arts (Painting) University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2019** Walk on Water, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa (curated by Emma Van Der Merwe)
- 2017** Chocolate Tales and Fluffy Farts, D-Contemporary Gallery, London, United Kingdom (curated by Mara Alves and Ines Valle)
- 2015** Nascence, Omenka gallery, Lagos, Nigeria (curated by Oliver Enwonwu)
- 2012** Pleasures and Pains, University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2019** Contemporary Performance, Florida Museum of Photographic Arts, Tampa, Florida, United States of America (curated by Kalup Donte Linzy)
- 2018** Time Has Gone, Lagos Photo Festival, Lagos, Nigeria (curated by Valentine Umansky, Charlotte Langhorst, Wunika Mukan, Eva Barois De Caevel)
- 2018** Ways of Seeing, and Being Seen, Victoria Yards, Johannesburg, South Africa (curated by Beathur M. Baker and Joan Legalamitlwa)
- 2018** Material Gains; Contemporary

African Art from The Spier Collection, Stellenbosch University Museum, Cape Town, South Africa (curated by Candice Allison)

- 2018** Investec Cape Town Art Fair, Everard Read Gallery Booth, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2017** Unforgettable (you!), NR studio, London (curated by Ines Valle)
- 2017** Echoes 4.0, Caisan Galleria, Helsinki, Finland
- 2017** Smokey Signals from the Groot Karoo: Connecting Spaces, Modern Art Project South Africa (MAPSA), Richmond, South Africa (curated by Liza Grobler)
- 2017** Smokey Signals from the Groot Karoo: Connecting Spaces, Circa Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa (curated by Liza Grobler and Emma Van Der Merwe)
- 2016** Coriolis Effect, Memory and Migration, Khoj Studios, New Delhi, India
- 2016** Breaking News, Art Twenty One Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria (curated by Joseph Gergel)
- 2016** The Philosopher's Muse, The Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria
- 2015** Platform, Art Twenty One Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria (curated by Joseph Gergel)
- 2015** Text and Image II; Symbiosis, Fotogalerie Wien, Vienna, Austria
- 2014** A Question of Value, Fluc, Vienna, Austria (curated by Ursula Maria Probst)
- 2014** Docks Art Fair, Omenka Gallery Booth, Lyon, France
- 2014** FNB Joburg Art Fair, Omenka Gallery Booth, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 2014** Society of Nigerian Artist at 50,

- Omenka
Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria
- 2014** The Centenary Remembrance
of Oba Ovonramwen, Oba
Akenzua Cultural Centre, Benin
City, Edo, Nigeria
- 2012** Hueformism V, University of Benin,
Benin City, Edo, Nigeria
- 2011** Hueformism VI, University of Benin,
Benin City, Edo, Nigeria

AWARDS

- 2018** Francis Greenburger Fellowship
- 2014** Nominated for the Magnum
Emergency Funds
- 2009** 2nd place winner Shun Cultism, art
competition organized by the
ministry of art and culture Port
Harcourt, Rivers state, Nigeria

RESIDENCY

- 2018** Art Omi, New York, United States of
America
- 2018** Artist in Residence Programme, The
Camargo Foundation, Cassis,
France
- 2017** Artist in Residence, Smokey
Signals from the Groot Karoo
Project in collaboration with
Modern Art Project South Africa
(MAPSA), Richmond, South Africa
- 2016** Artist in Residence Programme,
Coriolis Effect, Memory and
Migration, Khoj International Artist's
Association, New Delhi India
- 2014** Artists in Residence Programme,
Kultur Kontakt Austria, the Federal
Ministry of Education, the Art and
Culture, Vienna, Austria

ARTIST TALKS AND LECTURES

- 2016** Moremi High School, Obafemi
Awolowo University, Ile Ife, Osun
State, Nigeria
- 2015** Art Interview with Toluope Lamide,
The Art Express, aired on Television
Continental, Lagos, Nigeria.
- 2014** Alternative Resolutions (Modalities
behind the Front), Academy of Fine
and Applied art Studio of
Conceptual Art, Vienna





Promise O'NALI

Incognito, Acrylic on canvas, 2016, 122 x 122 cm



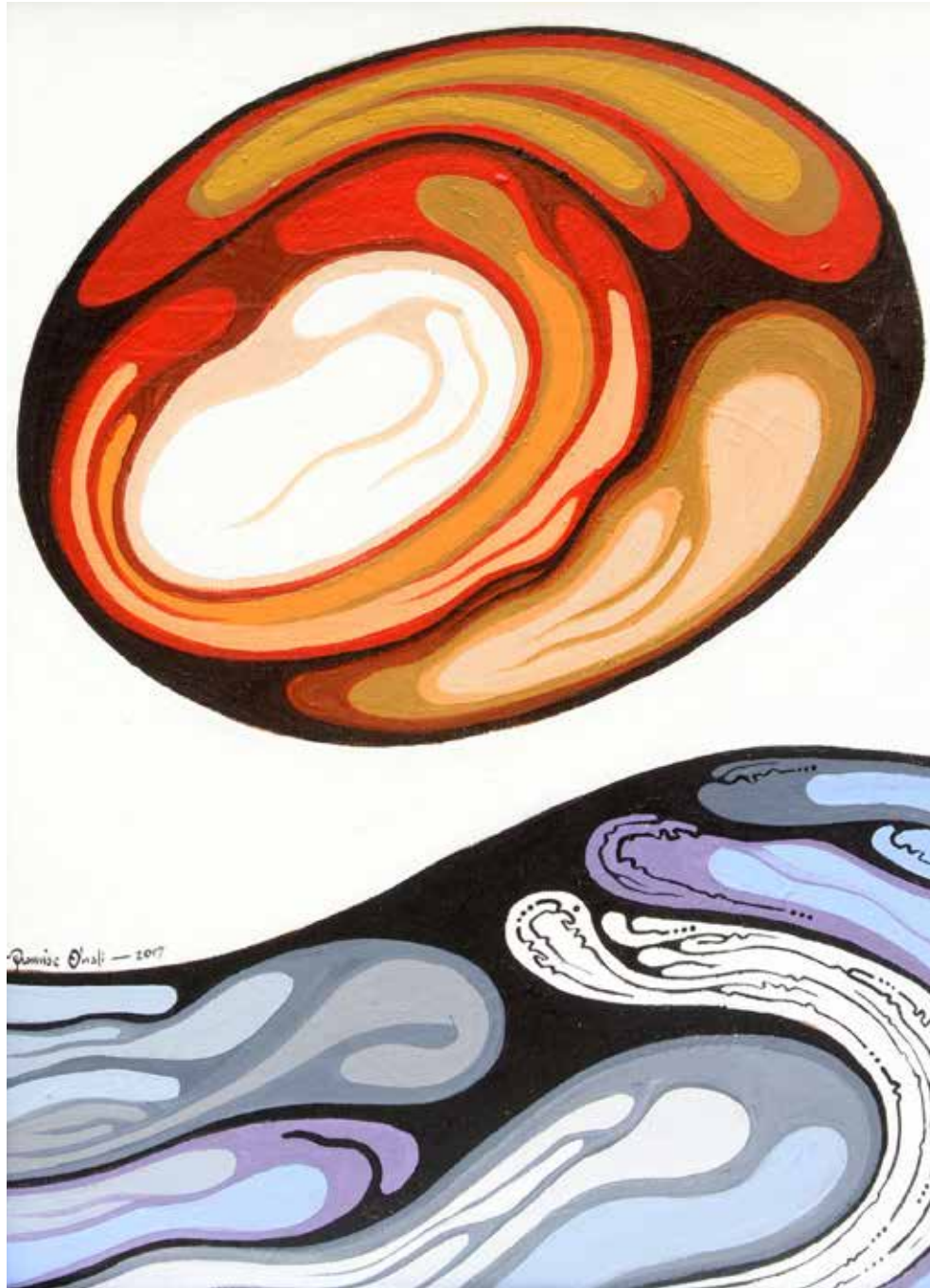


Promise O'nali (b. 1982) studied fine art at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he graduated with a degree in painting in 2007. His love for comic books and science and his pre-occupation with figuring out the inner workings of things influenced O'nali's experimental painting style. His use of diverse media to explore scientific questions are grounded in strong linearity and embryonic metaphors. O'nali's fascination with how our nerve endings disperse energy and electric charges which give birth to ideas and thought, are reflected in the subtle layers of his mixed media works.

Poetry for the Open Hearted, Acrylic on canvas, 2012, 114 x 138 cm



Landscape of Unconventional Dreaming I, Acrylic on canvas, 2018, 49 x 36 cm



Landscape of Unconventional Dreaming I, Acrylic on canvas, 2018, 49 x 36 cm



Promise O'nali: A Preview

Promise O'Nali is an artist whose distinct style configures thrilling rhythmic counterpoints of colours and line in space. His forms are ever adrift and adventurous; yet they bring to the sensibility of the connoisseur the fluid, florid and flattering foibles that cuddle nature in its clever upheavals and surprises. In the calm compositional format whereby his judgments unfold, as evocations worth contemplating, is a deep introspective mind; the type to whom society looks unto to speak for them with the delimited objects made for the canvas or picture plane.

Here lies originality in O'nali; not because his metaphors are prime to him. He pursues his titles and themes with a deft artistic craft that bear witness to individualised expressiveness. Preferably, working in an ideological space that contemporary culture has defined, he combines ambivalence with the known. In this way, his body of work privilege the surreal as time and mind appear eternally adrift and running into one another, and dazing our perception. Here

the swirls of colours remain his autograph.

O'nali and his signature mark in the swirl are seen to translate Gyorgy Kepes (1944) who proclaims that; "We live in a whirlwind of light qualities. From this whirling confusion, we build unified entities, those forms of experience called visual images." Kepes' thoughts on the nature of sensible reality bear both denotative and connotative inference as far as O'nali's body of work is in focus. The swirls in O'nali may denote the whirlwind of light from where natural colours emanate. The soap bubble is a testament to the power of light where all colours in swirl reflect their origin. On the other hand, *Diffusion* is borne out of a "whirling confusion" from where visual images are built as visual forms. The artist is unique for uncanny reconciliation that his or her fertile mind begets assimilating and digesting the conflicting impulses that inform his or her metaphor.

Diffusion comes against a backdrop of contemporary social

consciousness and how it connects to history as certainty lived out. The above interrogation is focused on the aspects of discrimination and the abuse of power in society. How has representation in O'nali's body of work addressed these dilemmas of society?

O'nali's work addresses the theme *Diffusion* from two predilections of visual narratives. In his two preferences, I recognise the following clusters; first is the embedded image of humans and the second, design-focused compositions. The listed artworks account for the first: *A Teenage Nigerian Girl Dreams of Andromeda*, *A Thin Line between Heaven and a Game of Chance*, *Code of Dharma*, *Intentions II*, *Through the Mind of a Creative Prodigal* and *Tinted Perceptions* etc. The group is distinct for its human presence the artist's embryonic or ovoid-shaped swirls. Suffusion of hues that are in multiple or tints and shades of monochromatic layers and placed against a flat background of colour marks them out. In them, the heads of the humans are located in brain-like forms. Do they then call attention to the cerebral functions in the human, where acts that belie active consciousness have their origin? Even in *Through the Mind of a Creative Prodigal*, as a portrait, is not left of the emphasis.

A Thin Line between Heaven and a Game of Chance and *Code of Dharma* introduce the dimension

of religion into human actions. What, however, is of interest in the pictures and the allegory they propose is their musculature. They appear toughened and lean, vertically lounged and attentive as if listening to a divine injunction "Lord, what would you have me do?"

Cloak of Consciousness, *Gaia's Dilemma*, *Incognito* and *Satori vs. Entropy* are in the second order of O'nali's body of work. They do not exhibit any natural or animate recall. Hence, I refer to them as design-oriented metaphors. They are more complicated compositions with a visual field that is more challenging. The only access to what they address is their titles. *Cloak of Consciousness II* is a bridge that bonds the first group to the second. The swirl overhangs the dominant shape of the brain below it, A cloak of dominant yellow hue links the swirling form to the brain-like form of the foreground. These compositions inch towards what postmodern critics regard as "the art of presence" or "speechless art." An onlooker confronting such work is usually forced to engage dialogue with the work to come to terms with its metaphor often or sometimes guided by what the artwork is entitled by.

Nevertheless, *Gaia's Dilemma* gives a challenging scenario in a swirl-dominated top segment with the tessellated body of colours that overhang a lower quadrangle

of neutral grey colour tattered at its top. From the tattered top segment lines that orient downwards resolve into different shapes with some constellating into hominid shapes. However, the lines taper into the linking grid of electronic sensor boards nodes. *Gaia's Dilemma* once again gives a clue to the thought process as it begets consciousness. But what is this Greek earth god saying?

History is an narration of consummated acts configured on the remainders human consciousness provide simply. O'nali has chosen to call back aspects of these acts that underlie discrimination and abuse of power. His omnibus approach can be read tangentially from the moral consciousness which piety inspires in the titles *A Thin Line between Heaven ...*, *Code of Dharma* and *Gaia's Dilemma*. What is evident in the body of work here is the overwhelming import of the place of consciousness, and the cerebral aspects of the human family symbolised in the thought processes.

Style in Promise O'nali's work has remained consistent with the twirls. No doubt its presence and persistence in his work are attributable to the dominant surrealist works of Obiora Udechukwu at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where O'nali studied. Chrydz Ikwemesi who currently teaches there is also surrealist. O'nali's embrace of the

surrealist flare has a resounding autograph in his swirls that host his many creative insights.

Professor Frank A. O. Ugiomoh

Frank A. O. Ugiomoh Ph. D. is a professor of history of art and theory and former Yemisi Adedoyin Shyllon Professor of Fine Art and Design, University of Port Harcourt and works now as an independent scholar .

Select Bibliography

Gyorgy Kepes, *The Language of Vision*, (New York: Dover, 1944) p. 15.
Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Presence" and Stanley Rosen, "Writing and Painting; The Soul as Hermeneut" in *The Language of Art History*, eds. Salim Kemal and Irvin Gaskel, (Cambridge: University Press, 1993) pp 11-35 & 35-50.

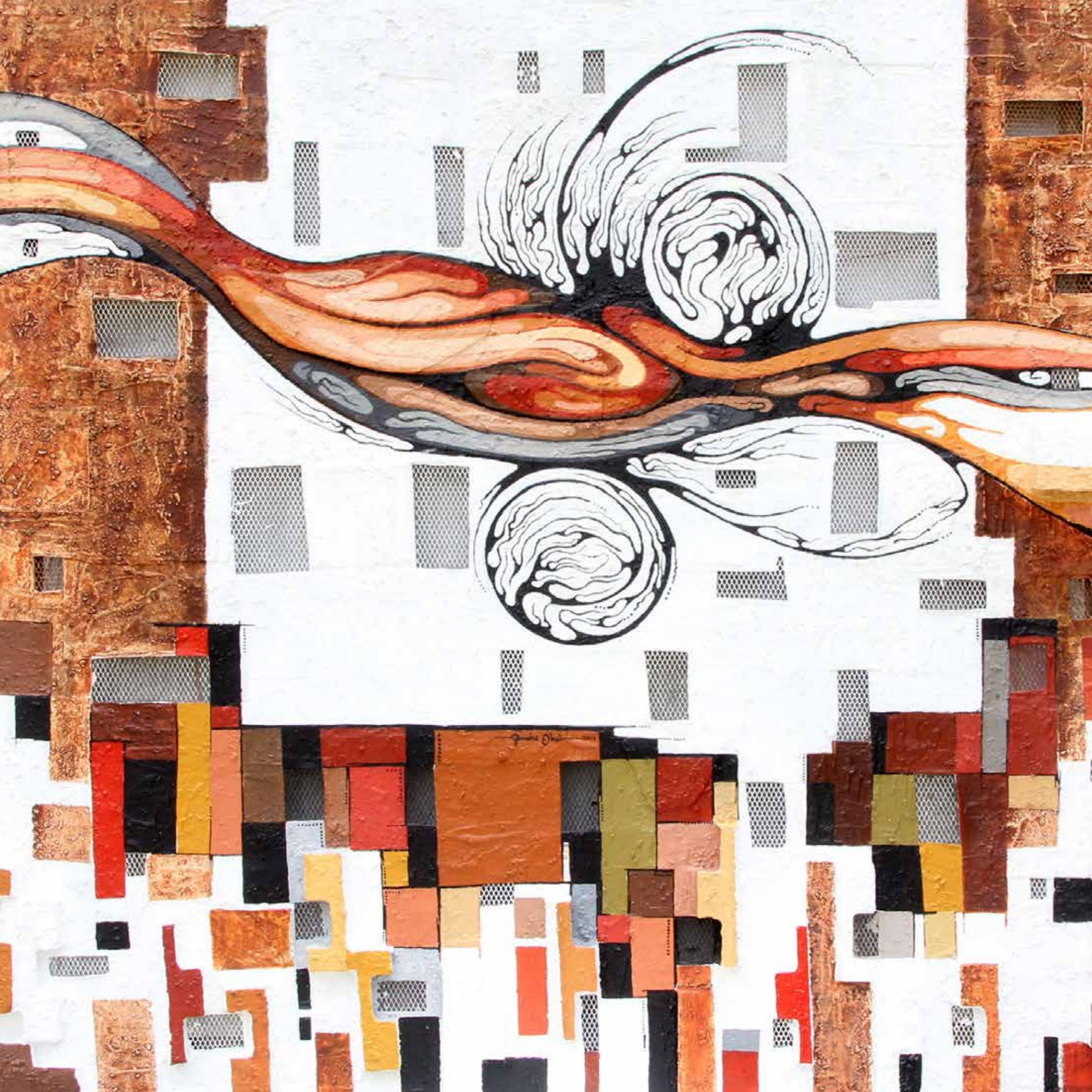


Cloak of consciousness II, Mixed media on canvas, 2015, 152.5 x 152.5 cm





Parallax of Paradigms, Mixed media, 2014, 132 x 129 cm





My technique is an ambiguous interplay of colours, fabrics, wire gauze, wood and a host of other unconventional materials which tell the story of human evolution, using Africa's consciousness as a point of departure. My signature style manifests as embryos, cells, skin and tissue in my artworks. I use diverse media to explore the concept of neo-evolution and how it affects political, cultural, economic, and social relationships. My creative dexterity is hinged on a combination of paper, fibre, wood, metal, wire, fabrics, polystyrene and a careful expressive rendition of colours.

As Nigeria passes through a drastic phase of economic and socio-political turmoil, my recent works interrogate how this new wind of change has affected the community's emotions, passion, empathy, and spirituality, as well as other aspects of modern interpersonal relationships. These recent works draw the observer into a world of lineal complexity comprised of a careful rendition of lines and swirls which evoke a certain sense of ambiguity.

My paintings of circles and embryos are metaphors for the evolution of consciousness, with most of the figures in profile, embedded in circles or within embryonic swirls representing the consciousness bubble of each individual, family, community, and nation. We find ourselves in these bubbles of our own creation and perception, which influences the way we interact and handle sensitive situations. The embryo represents our state of consciousness; it grows every day, but its growth rate depends heavily on what and how we feed it.



Gaia's Dilemma, Mixed media, 2014, 172 x 243 cm





Tainted Perceptions I & II, Mixed media on canvas, 2018, 60 x 60 cm (each)



Through the Mind of a Creative Prodigal, Mixed media on canvas, 2018, 98 x 70 cm



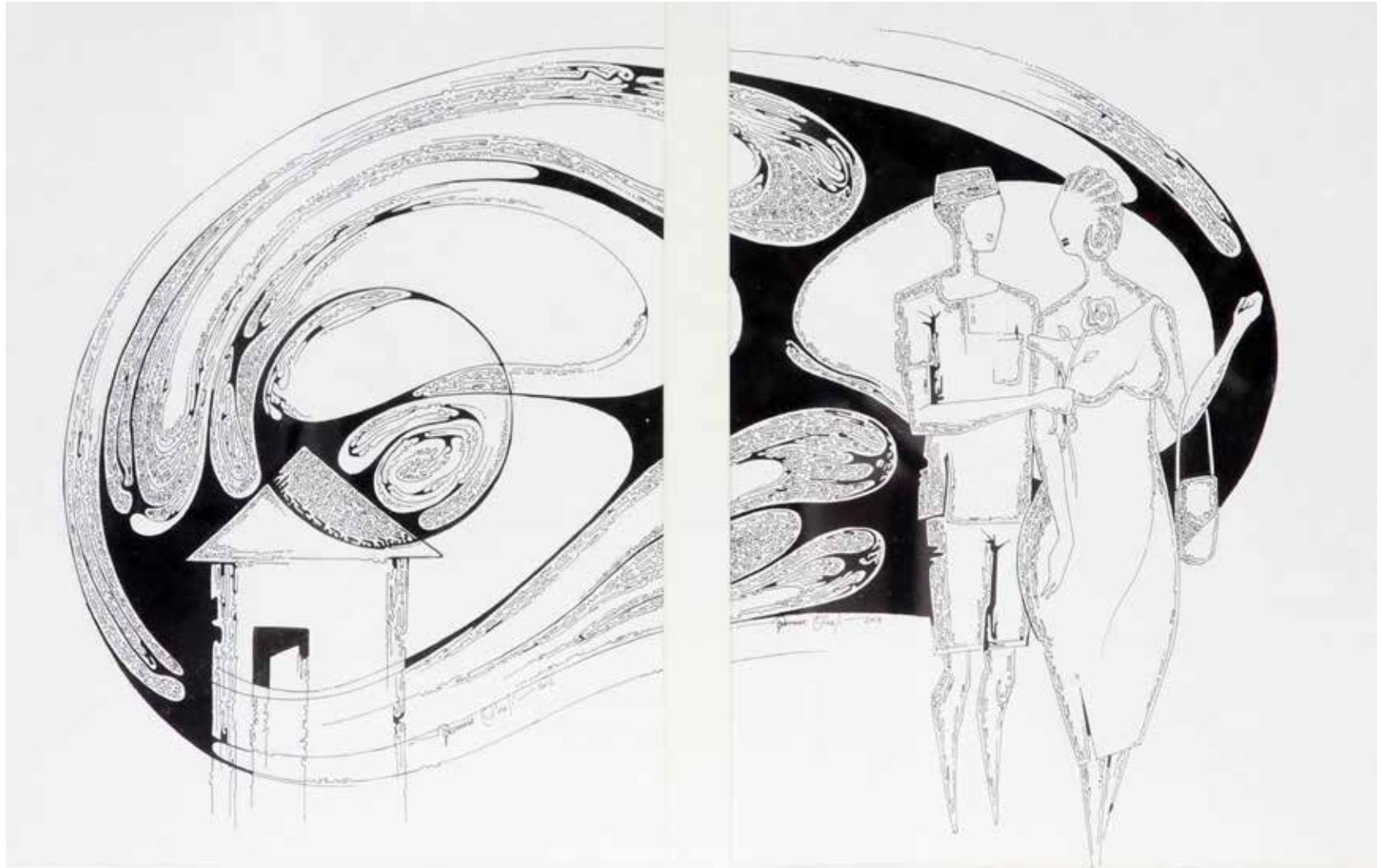
Millennials For Sale, Acrylic on canvas, 2018, 48 x 34.5 cm (each)



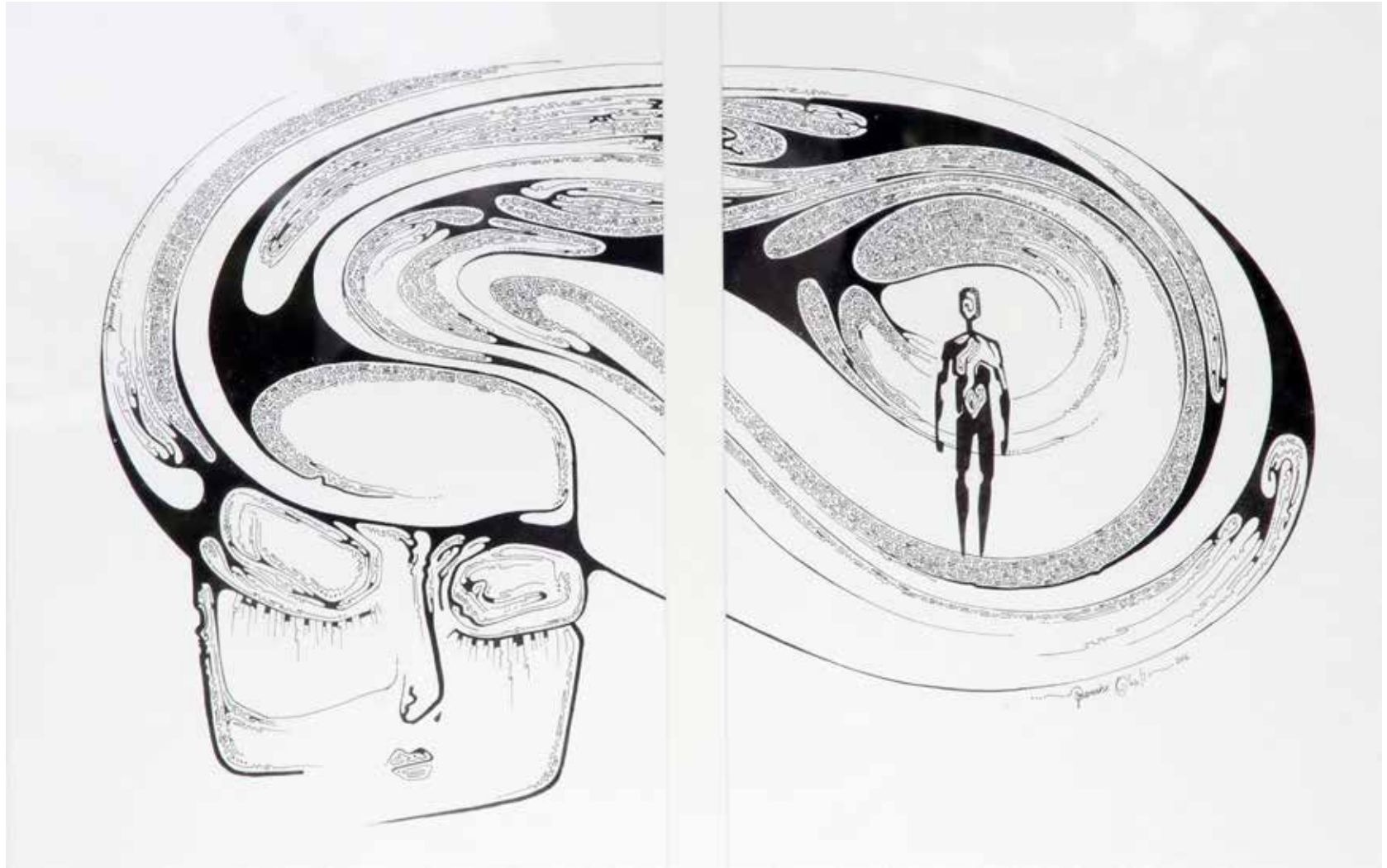


Intentions II, Mixed media on canvas, 2019, 122 x 122 cm

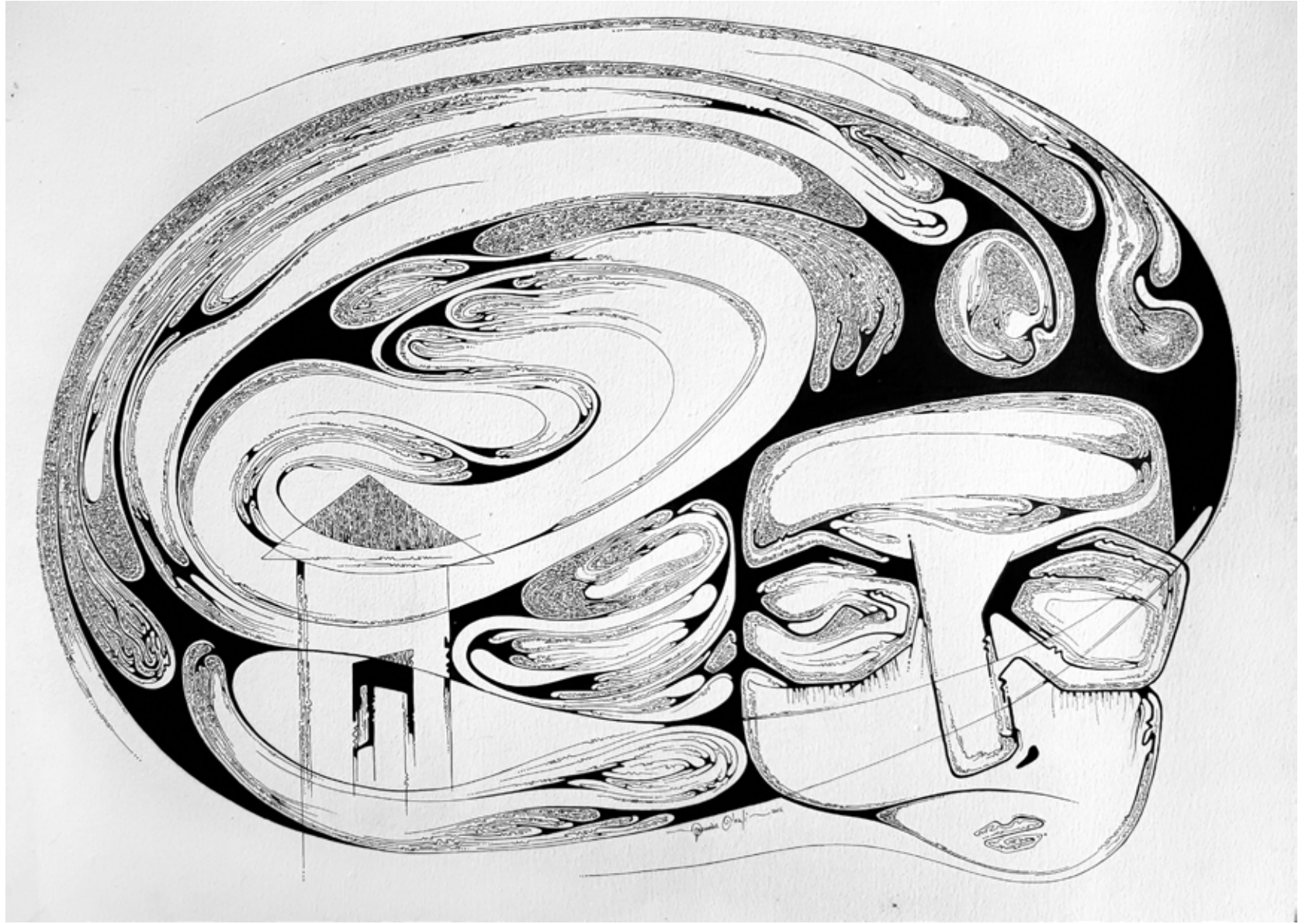




Daydreams of a pedestrian, Ink on archival paper, 2016, 28 x 45 cm



Dreaming on a Nebula, Ink on archival paper, 2016, 28 x 45 cm



A Teenage Nigerian Dreams of Andromeda, Ink on archival paper, 2016

“Andromeda is another galaxy so it is not about where you are or where you’re born into. It is about your ideas and the fact that you can dream of anything and work towards achieving it.”

Promise O’nali



Code of Dharma, Acrylic on canvas, 2019, 152.5 x 152.5 cm





Alterations Are Eminent, Mixed media on canvas, 2018, 152.5 x 152.5 cm



A Thin Line Between Heaven and A Game of Chance, Acrylic on canvas, 2018, 183 x 183 cm







These Uncanny Promises, Mixed media on canvas, 2018, 91.5 x 91.5 cm

CV

PROMISE O'NALI

EDUCATION

2007 B.A Fine and Applied Arts, Painting
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2014** Ije Uwa- Life's Trajectory,
Quintessence Gallery, Parkview
Estate, Ikoyi, Lagos
- 2012** Of Thoughts and Internal Chaos,
UNCANNY PROMISES, Eleonoras
King Gallery, Port Harcourt.
- 2011** Of Thoughts and Internal Chaos, Le'
Meridien Hotels, Port Harcourt
- 2010** City of Refuge, CEW gardens, Port
Harcourt,

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2018** ...of fractals and embryos, Alexis
Galleries, Victoria Island, Lagos
- 2017** idanimo, Terrakulture, Lagos
- 2017** Covers and contours, mansard
house, Victoria island, Lagos
- 2017** Nkolika, nsukka art school at 50,
Victoria island, Lagos
- 2017** Identities, denk spaces, Abuja
- 2017** Atyrama, ikoyi, Lagos
- 2017** synthwave, were house, Lekki,
Lagos
- 2014** New Conversations, Thought
Pyramid Art Center, Abuja
- 2014** Oreze II (The Kings Crowd), Obi's
Palace, Inland Town, Onitsha
- 2013** (joint), Fruition, Las Vencedoras
Galleries, Port Harcourt.
- 2012** Artburst 4, Annual SNA Exhibition,

Port Harcourt

- 2011** Artburst 3, Annual SNA Exhibition,
Port Harcourt,
- 2008** Life in My City, Enugu,
- 2007** Dreams Alive 4, New Arts Theatre,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- 2007** Degree Exhibition, Fine and Applied
Arts Department, University of
Nigeria, Nsukka.
- 2007** Life in My City, Enugu,
- 2006** Away But Not Gone, Dreams Alive
3, New Arts Theatre, University of
Nigeria, Nsukka.
- 2006** Expressions, Protea Hotels, Enugu.
- 2005** Dreams Alive 2, New Arts Theatre,
University of Nigeria Nsukka.

WORKSHOPS AND POETRY PERFORMANCES

- 2008** The One- Minutes Video Workshop,
Alliance Francaise, Enugu.
- 2006** 'Whispers of Silence' World Campus
Poetry Club (UNN), Annual Poetry
Festival, New Arts Theatre, U.N.N.
- 2005** 'Silenced Silence', World Campus
Poetry Club, (UNN), Annual Poetry
Festival, New Arts Theatre, U.N.N.
- 2005** The Re-discovery of Tradition, Uli
Interactive Workshop, University of
Nigeria, Nsukka.
- 2004** The Discovery of Culture, Alliance
Francaise, Enugu.



In Conversation With Promise O'NALI & Chibuike UZOMA

Sandra Mbanefo Obiago: What does DIFFUSION mean to you, as two artists who are on opposite ends of the spectrum, but whose works have a lot of synergy.

Promise O'nali: The first thing that comes to mind is our consciousness level and being able to move from one state of being to another, be it intellectually, spiritually, economically or whatever. It is the ability to move from one point to the other. There is always room for improvement, room to learn more and add to your knowledge.

SMO: How do you express that through your art?

PO: Through the lyrical movement of lines and color and that resonance and dynamism in life which is what I try to express in my work. No matter what, we have to keep moving and advancing so I try to paint that. Also the recurring circular theme represents a consciousness bubble. When I started, they were smaller circles and then I progressed to bigger circles and now I'm doing really big 6 by 6 feet

circles; so that expansion is evident. My color scheme too has over time moved from very bright to muted colors and now to a combination of bright and muted colors.

SMO: Chibuike, do you see that in Promise' work?

Chibuike Uzoma: Yes I do. Promise and I are very similar in thought but we interpret those thoughts and ideas in different ways. I like to stretch my sensibilities and making art for me isn't something that comes in a formula, it's from things building organically. I always say it's like an orange ripening and going from green to yellow and changing color as part of the decaying process. At some point you have to eat it to stop the process or else it becomes inedible. For me, that's where a work is finished, where I can't do anything more to it, except to consume it. Diffusion and working together with Promise in this case is our attempt to create a bigger being and for the first time I'm looking at how truly our art works are coming together and the synergy we share and the

different ways we interpret the same thoughts.

SMO: How does it feel to be in an exhibition and have your work opposite someone else's work that is so different from yours?

CU: I met Promise around 2015 at an exhibition where we got talking and we thought it would be nice to have a joint exhibition one day in the future. All of a sudden it's happening now and though our works are different in how they look, I'm happy about it. I've always told him that I can't paint the way he paints and I don't know how he moves his hands the way he does. When I paint, I'm kind of always hasty because I paint with feeling and once that feeling is gone, it becomes a struggle to finish, which is the exact opposite with Promise. I burn works and he doesn't.

SMO: Promise, do you burn works? (laughter)

PO: No I don't. For me the work is never finished till it leaves my studio and sometimes even after. I've had to exhibit a work and then take it back to the studio to rework it. It's a process for me as it is for Chibuike too. My mind is like the heads of a hydra and painting is a way of calming myself; I can sit with one canvas for days painting but my mind is thinking one million different things. If I was to work the way my mind wanted, I would be a very erratic person.

CU: I totally agree with that. Truly, a painting is never finished but it gets to a point that there's nothing more I can do to it anymore. It just takes up a life of its own because my aim is to make timeless pieces that fifty to hundred years from now people, and myself if I'm still alive, are still discovering new things about them. Making the work has to stop at some point even for Promise. If I buy his work he's not going to come to my house to keep painting it but looking at a work and getting the meaning out of it and having it stay relevant is what makes a work timeless.

SMO: When you look at the process of creating art Chibuike, you're more emotional and you do things quicker and Promise, you tend to take your time even though you say your mind is hyper active. I think we see that quality in both your works. The question is where is the overlap? Where is the synergy?

PO: I think we are the same but the difference is in our art process. I recently found out we went to the same secondary school in Port Harcourt, which is where we both grew up. He started his art practice in Port Harcourt with someone I know and look up to. Our meeting in Lagos instead of Port Harcourt where we both grew up is a mystery. I went to buy canvas and there was this guy there with very long dreadlocks. Then he had dreadlocks and I had short hair, but now it's the other

way around; his hair is short and mine is dreadlocked. He asked me what brand of canvas to buy and I advised him to go for the thickest ones because they are usually pure cotton so all you have to do is prime them. That was how we met and started talking and our friendship grew. We got to find out that our personalities are quite similar but our art process isn't.

CU: I really like Promise' ideas and they aren't so different from mine. I've had the opportunity to stay over at his place before and I know how early he wakes up sometimes to start working which is synonymous with how I also work. We have similar ideas but different ways of execution. I can't do what he does at all. I don't have the temperament.

SMO: Both of you went to art school although you Promise are 10 years older.

CU: Yes, a full decade (laughter).

SMO: Age aside, do you think is it important to study art or do you think talent is enough?

CU: I'll always recommend it is important to study art. Studying art is learning and that is something you do for the duration of your life. I don't believe there's such a thing as a self-taught artist. I've learned a lot more even after school and I learned it from other people. Time is such a valuable currency that if

I can achieve something faster by learning it directly from a source that can teach me, that works better for me. Death can claim you at any time so it has made me move hastily to do as much as I can.

PO: I would say it's very important to get an education but studying art, I don't know about that. I went to art school and I was excited in the first year which I carried over into the second year. By the third year I was fed up with the whole system. They don't really teach you much in art school and you're basically there to do research on your own. The lecturer gives you a couple of assignments for the semester and doesn't come back until it's time to grade the paintings in like two months. So if you are unable to do your own research or learn how to harness your thoughts and ideas, it's difficult because you have to do it all on your own. Art is a learning process and you still have to evolve on your own.

SMO: Looking back at your artistic journey, who or what has been a great influence on your creativity?

PO: When I was in school I really loved Chris Ikwuemesi because he inspired us to do a lot of research, to work and to exhibit. He placed emphasis on putting your work out there so you can learn and improve. I've done a lot of that and learned from it. A lot of artists I've met online have taught me to push



my career beyond what everyone else is thinking.

CU: I was influenced by people around me, in the sense that they might not have been artists, but I copied the way they did things, such as discipline and focus. To gain knowledge, I started to read a lot and my work is referenced to literary scholars like Chinua Achebe and Frantz Fanon. They are both cultural thinkers who I believe were relevant to their time but also ahead of their time. I love the way they could calmly stage a literary protest and also communicate their ideas critically in a simple manner. When I make work those are the qualities I look out for. I also get influenced by other art and if you look at my work you might see some dot paintings that are influenced by Damien Hirst and influences by Gerhard Richter and Maria Lassnig. The late Ben Enwonwu said “culture is not static”, so I also share that same belief. Through my travels I have also been greatly influenced by different people and different art forms so almost every art I’ve encountered, I’ve learned from.

SMO: What is your favorite Chinua Achebe book and why?

CU: My favorite is ‘No Longer at Ease’ because he was dealing with the same issues that I believe Frantz Fanon also dealt with in ‘The Wretched of the Earth’. This was during post-colonialism and

immediately after independence and the part of the book that resonated with me the most had to do with Okonkwo’s son’s conversation with a white man who was about to leave. The white man was telling him that he didn’t understand why the locals were choosing that moment to go on long vacations when their country had just become theirs again. The country had just regained independence and there was so much work to be done but they preferred to go on leave instead of jumping in to work to make the country better.

SMO: Interesting. Promise, are you inspired by what you read?

PO: Yes, but not by Chinua Achebe. (laughter).

SMO: So who inspires you and why?

PO: Stephen King. He has a way of creating a picture. He goes down to the very smallest detail and describes so that it’s like you’re watching a story unfold in front of you. I didn’t know about him until I read his book ‘The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon’ and I was immediately drawn in. I read ‘Duma Key’ which is about a big shot lawyer who became a painter and his paintings started helping him solve problems. It was interesting to me because it involved an artist. Then I read ‘Song of Susannah’ and ‘The Gunslinger’ and I found it interesting the way he weaves

his stories around the reader. Most times when I'm creating a painting, I'm immersed into this fantasy world in my head and I want the audience to submerge themselves and feel what I felt when creating the work when they interact with the painting.

SMO: They say that a big part of creativity is discipline. It is not the inspiration or emotion that we imagine the artist feels and all of a sudden it all comes together. So speak to us about the discipline of painting and how you keep going day after day. What gets your juices flowing, what are some other things aside from literature that help you on this daily grind of being an artist and producing creative work.

CU: For me making art is just one way I add meaning to my life. There's always this misconception that artists are free of structure and can decide when to and when not to work as the mood strikes. But for art to work as a career, discipline is important. I left Lagos for Ife just to work for two years. I was just there drilling and I wasn't going anywhere and neither was anyone coming into my space. It was very intense and I just really wanted to find myself and to understand what my goals were. People like Promise and I, who studied art in university, were told that we would amount to nothing, so we never look at money as a motivation. So there was something else that still drove us to do what we are doing despite

having friends and family who were upset that we were wasting our brilliance. So why am I really doing this? It's a question I'm still asking myself and I don't know the answer. But every morning when I wake up I think of painting first. When I was in Ife, I would paint from daylight until there was no more light. The same way a scientist is obsessed with figuring out the telescope, or a banker wakes up every morning to go do the same thing every day, is the same way I want to wake up and do this thing that makes a lot of sense to me.

SMO: You said you go into retreat. You went to Ife which is obviously a much quieter place in order to work with less distraction.

CU: Something about the way of life in Lagos always makes it seem as if you always need money and sometimes people believe that I'm doing this because of financial reward. In Ife there was no pressure to make a living and no need to impress anyone, I just had to find myself, destroy whatever I could and make something beautiful out of it.

PO: When I was in secondary school I had a hard time deciding what I wanted to study in university. I was always drawing so everyone said I had to study engineering or something in the sciences or I'd be broke. At some point I decided that since I loved drawing I would study

architecture but I wasn't very good with calculations and formulas.

SMO: Even though your work is very scientifically oriented?

PO: Yes. I think that part came to me naturally. I was writing my exams to study architecture and my older brother who was already in university came and asked me why I was studying to write exams for architecture. He said in his university most of the works of the students in the art department weren't as good as mine. So I switched and wrote the exams for art and I got very good grades and got accepted into university. In school I found myself wanting more. I'd always wanted to create large intensive work but the curriculum wasn't welcoming so I got bored and was always working in my room doing my own thing. Over the years I have had ideas about what I wanted the audience to learn from my art. If I can raise the awareness of one person or encourage them to look at life differently by interacting with my art, I think that's something. That keeps me going because I think we need to learn a lot, loosen up and think outside the box.

CU: Just to add to something he said, there is a genuine love for what I do. I'm someone who believes there's always something new to learn. Some people feel painting is old school when it comes to contemporary art but I

believe there are still aspects to be discovered. I've been privileged to be in Promise's house and I know how early he wakes up or never went to bed to work on a painting. Also there's something obsessive about art, it's like a high that you can't get from something like alcohol. Sometimes I make a mark on my canvas and I feel all my hairs standing. I was telling Promise that every mark or splash of color on a painting of mine is liable to destroy the work. It's an organic process that is also very decisive. And every mark I make that works out, it's like blood rushes up to my head. It's a feeling that you want to keep having and it's addictive but not harmful.

PO: Like he said it's like a high. When you finish a piece you get to bask in the excitement for a while but after a couple of days it fades and you want to do another piece to reclaim that feeling. It's also about what you want to do with your art at the end of the day. For me it's not just about selling, it's about creating awareness and a level of consciousness and I'm going to do that no matter how small, every single day.

SMO: You've talked about this rush of energy that you get and the fact that you have this passion to create that is renewed every morning. People often ask if it's creativity/talent or ambition that is more important in an artist's life.



PO: It's about your discipline. Sometimes when I put my work on Instagram I get comments about how talented I am but it has nothing to do with talent because what they see is as a result of research and consistency. If it was about talent I would have been doing what I'm doing now about ten to fifteen years ago. What I'm doing now is not what I will be doing in the next five or ten years, I have to grow.

CU: I'm not even sure about the validity of the words 'talent' or 'gift'. People often use it with me but I don't recognize it. There so many other things I recognize such as discipline and will and commitment. I don't ever claim to be self-taught and everything I do, I have learned. So where is the talent or the gift? That sounds to me like I fell from mars and suddenly know how to do all these things. Ambition doesn't stand alone. Sometimes what looks like ambition is just how the artist wants his work to be perceived and naturally it just leads there. I think it's a by-product. Like how you render a service well and you automatically get paid for it rather than looking for how to get paid without doing anything. That's the way it works for me so there's always a link between ambition and instead of talent, I'll say where I and the work want to go.

SMO: With this exhibition, what would you say is your main message expressed through your work?

CU: I just want to open up our consciousness to the fact that there's more. I want to move beyond the things that are becoming cliché. I want to put up an argument where things are fluid. I like the fluid theory a lot and like to keep things fluid. I want to remind people to look forward to something new. Back to the influence of writers on me, look at Chinua Achebe, whose work is universal but when you look at how he was using proverbs in the work, he wasn't writing it for any particular audience in mind. He wrote it true to the way it was used locally but it had a universal appeal. That same sort of vocabulary is present in my work and also in Promise's.

PO: When I had an exhibition in 2014 I was talking about evolution, mind consciousness, space exploration and some Lagos artists came to me and asked why I was sounding like an 'Oyinbo' and instead talk about things like hunger and traffic. What I was talking about had nothing to do with being American or European, it was a human issue. Things like climate change and global warming meanwhile we are here talking about hunger and traffic, which are important yes but there are other pressing issues. If we don't talk about climate change and all of a sudden it hits us in ways we can't imagine and haven't even had discussions on potential solutions or ways that we can prevent adding to the problem. I was in Port Harcourt last year and they were talking about

the black soot and the governor was saying he wanted to sue the petroleum companies. They should invest in finding out the source of the problem so that they can start to fix it. It's been about 3 years and still no one knows the extent of the danger of the black soot. You can't walk barefoot around your house because the bottom of your feet will turn black or in the morning when you are taking your bath and you wipe your nose, you'll find black residue on your fingers that show the dirt you've inhaled in one day. It's a serious issue and it is incumbent on us to find a solution. Fixing the problem here will help contribute to the global outcome. Fifty to a hundred years from now, what Chibuike and I are doing right now will be discussed as part of art history in Nigeria. It is part of what will be studied in the future as long as African or Nigerian art is being discussed, take it or leave it.

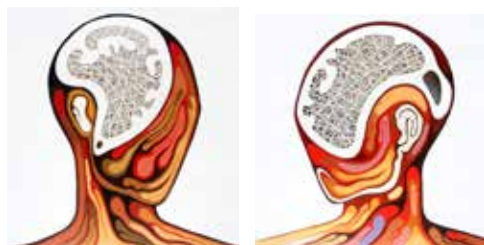
SMO: But you wouldn't consider yourself to be producing what is termed as African or Nigerian art would you?

CU: No. Some scholars may not agree with me on this, but I don't think those terms should even exist in this contemporary world. There's no way someone in 2019 can make "African art". Most times when that is said, it is in relation to works that were done in pre-colonial times. Colonialism put a stop to the rise of our indigenous civilizations, nsibidi and uli went away and Benin

bronze castings never evolved. I've also been told before that my works look 'oyinbo' and that's because the international scene has constructed people's beliefs to certain visual aesthetics that are expected to come from a certain place like Nigeria or Africa. A lot of the time they are not aware that the works they are used to seeing looked that way because they were interpretations of events or life around that era. The Benin bronzes and statues for example depict the Oba as the biggest figure amongst the others to point out symbolically that the Oba is always the head. The head was always larger on statues to let everyone know that was the most cherished part of the body. We've evolved past that and keep evolving but the world would have you believe you have to create work to fit their expectations. Universal work doesn't necessarily refer to the visual aesthetics of the work, it's also the kind of ideas you're trying to address with your work. Are the ideas particular to just you or can they appeal to other people in the world. There were some works I created while I was in France where I juxtaposed the Biafran civil war and the First and Second World Wars using Napoleon and Biafran Madonnas to show that war is something that happens everywhere. So looking at the work, you might not recognize the Biafran Madonna but you'll find something else that is relatable to you and where you're from. Response and being able to relate



Ma (Portrait of My Mother As a Spinster), Oil, oil stick on canvas, 2018, 121 x 106.5 cm



Tainted Perceptions II, Mixed media on canvas, 2018, 60 x 60 cm (each)

in art is very vital.

SMO: Interesting. So what was the inspiration behind this work *Portrait of my mother as a spinster*?

CU: I've always believed that I can't draw people that I love because I felt like I knew them too well to depict them. So whatever depiction is made of them is an abstract of who they really are. This was me thinking about my mom and I was reading a book by Patricia Adaobi where she wrote about the patient unending love and sacrifice of a mother. It brought up ways in which my mom had loved me that I didn't know at the time. I had a difficult time growing up with my mom because I felt like she didn't really love me. But if I look back, I can tell that she did. For instance I had to do my homework on the playground where my friends were playing but it didn't matter because I had to focus. It seemed harsh at the time because I couldn't join my friends who were playing but right now I can be in my studio and the whole of Lagos is out partying and I'll work and that's one of the things that have informed my discipline. I can see how she loved me all this while and I never knew.

SMO: And the use of the color red? There's a lot of red in your faces. Is that subconscious?

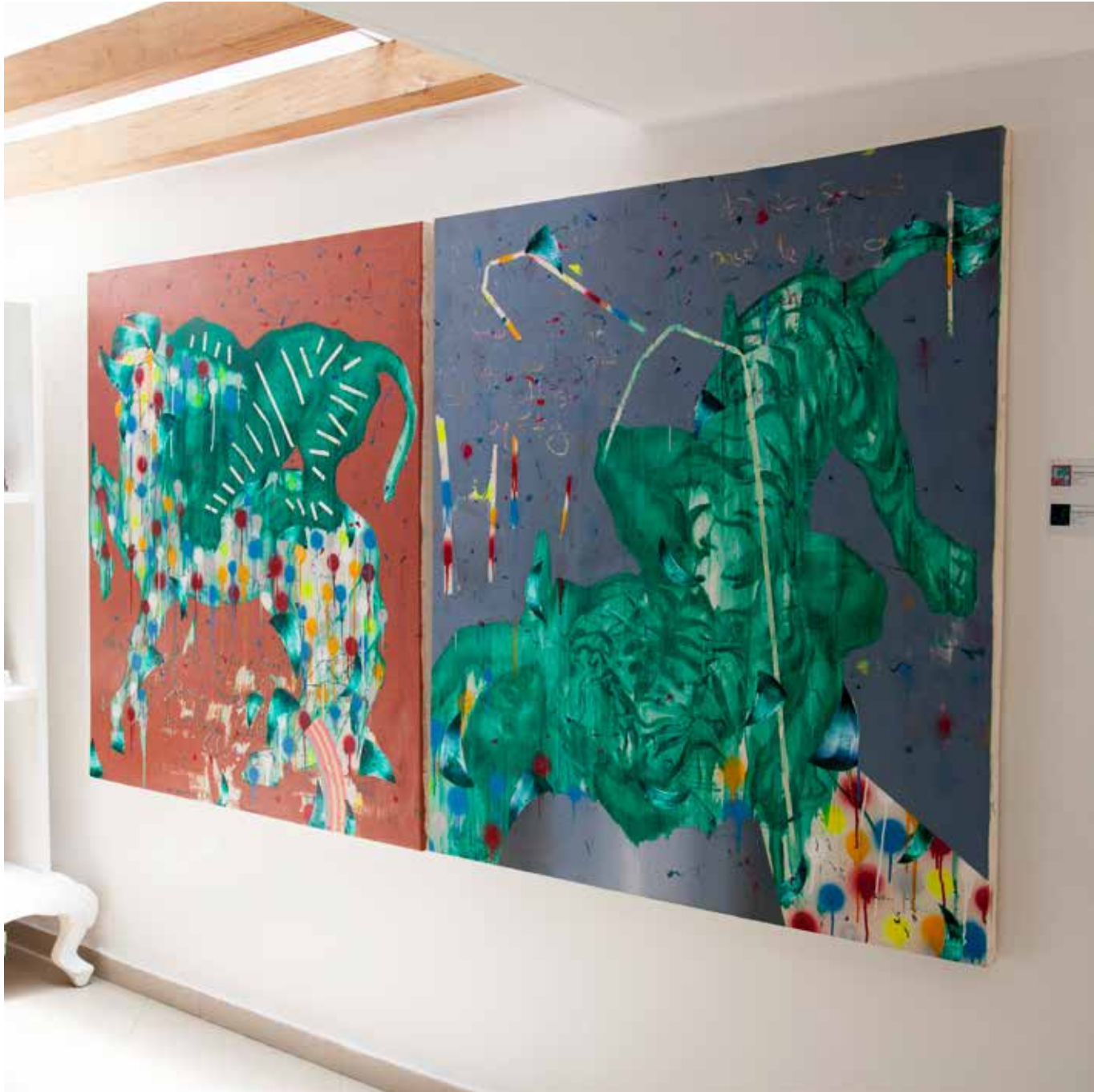
CU: Yes it's subconscious. I'll hide under that. (laughter)

SMO: Promise in your work there are embryonic, worlds swirling within worlds alone in a vast universe and all of a sudden you start to introduce the human form, how has that evolution happened?

PO: I started with the evolution theory and that has been the journey. In school I painted a lot of faces and women but after school I decided not to make paintings that are only beautiful. I wanted to tell a story and convey a message with my works. If you look closely most of my works have only one figure in them. It's a reflection of the way I grew up and the way I've evolved. We live in a country where there are more than 120 million people but you still feel alone because you have to get a lot of things done on your own. You have to buy a generator, still pay your electricity bills and sometime you have to drill your own borehole and basically have to do everything yourself. In this country you learn how to do things on your own.

SMO: So you're reflecting on the solitary nature of life.

PO: Art has been a journey of self-discovery. For example the strings in this series '*Tainted Perceptions*' talks about how people see you and then make up an idea of the kind of person they think you are and sometimes those ideas are wired into their subconscious, so no matter what you do or say, their





Untitled (Lion And Horse), Oil, oil stick, spray paint on canvas
2018, 152 x 137 cm



No Longer At Ease, Oil, oil stick, spray paint on canvas
2018, 152 x 137 cm

perception never changes.

SMO: You've used all kind of really interesting materials like styrofoam, lace, wire gauze etc.

PO: The wire gauze was actually an accident. At some point I wanted to make my canvas see-through so I padded it and cut through. But it wasn't able to stand so I thought of ways to make it stand and I tried wire gauze and got a lot of positive feedback from people so I decided to expand on that

SMO: Chibuikwe talk to us about your work, 'Lion and Horse'

CU: I was looking at the culture of discrimination. How a dominant culture versus a minor culture which for us right now is like the blacks and the whites and if you distill it further it is like the major cultures in Nigeria versus the minor cultures and to distill it even further, among the Igbos you have the Osu (outcasts) and the free born. I was looking at having equal opportunity or equal results for equal effort. On the work, the text that runs through is a quote from Frantz Fanon that talks about the reason why we protest and to paraphrase, he says we protest not because we want to but for just some reasons we can no longer breathe. The painting depicts a Lion attacking a stallion and trying to forcefully take his position which is something I illustrate further in 'No Longer at Ease' which came from the book with the same title

by Chinua Achebe. It came from the part where a white woman describing a sexual experience with a black African man using the metaphor of being "attacked like a tiger" as if to say a regular man would not have performed that way. It's like what David Hammons said in response to another artist's work where he looked at his work and said paraphrased, "you have so much luxury and I wish I can do the same but because of my condition, I am forced to always negotiate my own space". I can't just paint a flower and leave, I have to paint something that talks about my situation. I am not in at politically quiet terrain and so I do not have that luxury. I'd rather tell a story that relates to whatever issues I'm going through.

SMO: Promise let's talk about the inspiration behind this work 'A Thin Line between Heaven and a Game of Chance'

PO: At some point I learned that something some Nigerians pray about is "miracle alerts". It is when you're at home praying and you get a bank credit alert on your phone out of nowhere. It is about wanting a utopia without actually working for it. Our fathers and grandfathers have sold us this 'e go betta' dream and we are expected to pass it on to our children and to their children over time. To create the kind of society we want to live in we actually have to work for it. Like what Chibuikwe was saying about



A Thin Line Between Heaven and A Game of Chance, Acrylic on canvas
2018, 183 x 183 cm



Kid I (Self Portrait), Oil, oil stick on canvas
2017, 61cm x 137cm x 152cm
(Diptych)

us gaining independence but then going away on vacation when there's a lot of work to be done instead of getting to work to make that dream society a reality we are running away and expecting a miracle to happen.

SMO: Chibuiké, is there a street kid here that is trying to get out in this painting titled 'The Kid I' ?

CU: The figure is actually carrying a kid goat.

PO: And it looks like you!

CU: Yes, it's a self-portrait. This is one of my works that isn't a metaphor. Things happened for me early as an artist and I was made aware that I was young and undeserving or that I was too hasty in my drive for success or that I was too young for some of my aspirations. I heard that so many times that I was made to feel diminished, naïve or stupid whereas I worked really hard for everything I got. While I was in life I observed kid goats and saw that regardless of their small size they can jump over an obstacle that is four times their height so I felt like taking one for a pet. So this is me in a cassava farm with a kid goat in my arms trying to tell myself I should be allowed to reach for any height I want to reach. I made this in life where I was not bothered about anything but creating art that can stand the test of time. There was so much anger and sadness at the time but this came out as one of

the most successful and colorful works I created. Most of the works I made at that time were really dark. But then I was in India with their very bright scene, and a friend I made was painting with neon colors to my disbelief. After I had assimilated a bit and I got happy again to be a painter, colors came back to me and this time around I had become unsure of how to paint with colors which is why this painting looks like this; with some flat colors, some smudged colors and splatters. I don't paint with a brush or a palette knife anymore. I make scratches and quick impressions and they just build to recognizable forms. There's nothing really identifying these as cassava leaves in the painting yet you know that these are leaves. To create the pink stain of the cocoyam I just splattered the color. I'm trying to see how I can create without using conventional means. Sometimes people ask me what my style is and I say I'm too young to have one because I'm still evolving.

SMO: Do you think you're too young to have a style?

CU: I'd rather let time do it for me.

SMO: Well, you have a definite style. It's all in your DNA, just as Promise has a specific style.

SMO: Well, you have a definite style. It's all in your DNA, just as Promise has a specific style

CU: I think it is showing but in ten



Untitled - Did You Sin Last Week (I-IV)
2018, 24 x 18cm (each)



Untitled -Perfect Punishment (I)
Oil, oil stick, news print, book on
strawboard paper
2018, 42.5 x 31cm

years' time they'll be able to draw a line. Right now I'm not focused on creating according to a specific style. When I first started my works were quite rigid because I was following a 'be African' formula. For instance in Nigeria if you paint a night scene everyone will say you're copying Olaku or if you use a lot of brush strokes they'll say it's Ejiogu because these were the guys who made expansive works in that style. I paint a hand because I can paint a hand and when I get tired I stop. As you can see, I didn't paint the other hand and I feel it works.

SMO: So do you sketch first and then paint over or do you just start from a splotch of paint and just create?

CU: Sometimes the ideas are too many in my head and very conflicting so to start, I make a little sketch to guide me.

SMO: What about the confessional series?

CU: It started 2 years ago in Port Hacourt where I was visiting some friends. I had this little watercolor pad with me and I asked them if they would model for me which they graciously obliged. Whenever I got done I would ask each one, 'did you sin last week?' and whatever they told me, I wrote down. I was trying to look at the honesty with which people can say things. I grew up a Christian but

I ask questions like why are people more free in places like the barber shop or the club than in churches where there's supposed to be liberty and total freedom from judgment. I got different answers and I wrote down their answers. I was looking at how open they could be. I was like a priest at confession.

SMO: So people were coming to you for confession?

CU: Yup, and I'm the pope.

SMO: How about this series; 'Perfect Punishment?'

CU: My friend Hajara was a teacher during NYSC and was punishing students for falling asleep in her class. She told a child to write repeatedly 'I will not sleep in class again' and if you look closely at the works you can see those pages of text. I saw the papers on her desk and asked if I could use them to make an artwork and she agreed. There were seven pieces of paper so that was where the 'perfect' came from with the number seven being seen as the perfect number. I was also asking the larger question as to what is the perfect punishment for people in society. For the child, this was the perfect punishment but what if someone steals a maggi cube in Aba market and in an instant they put tires around the person and set them ablaze for just ten naira? So this is a work that centers on our sense of judgment. I also like the decaying



Incognito, Acrylic on canvas
2016, 122 x 122 cm



A Teenage Nigerian Dreams of Andromeda, Ink on archival paper
2016

process. I don't like for that process to look man-made, I'd rather let it take its own course. I have some works that I bury in a termite field so they decay organically.
(laughter)

SMO: so what happens when you sign those works? do you sign your name and add with the kind assistance of termites? This is then truly organic art! Promise, I wanted to ask you about the work titled 'Incognito'.

PO: That painting is about a philosophy we have especially in Africa. When I was serving in Taraba, they called the fathers 'Maigida' which translates literally to head of the house. They believed the home was put together by the man of the house but is that really the case? Most times all they do is provide money while the wives do everything else... So what if the man doesn't know how to make money and his wife does and makes more money than him?

SMO: Is this then posing a feminist question?

PO: I have a high regard for women because I was raised by a single mom and I have three sisters and over time I've come to realize that women should be given equal chances to prove themselves. So 'Incognito' is about the perception that the man is the head of the house where really it is the woman who runs the house and is its true

head.

SMO: What about this one, 'A Teenage Nigerian Dreams of Andromeda'? I love this work and it reminds me of something out of the Oshogbo sacred art movement. I see a Susanne Wenger influence.

PO: The house in this piece is a metaphor for the way we drew houses like huts in primary school and that represents the African terrain in a nutshell. Andromeda is another galaxy so it is not about where you are or where you're born into. It is about your ideas and the fact that you can dream of anything and work towards achieving it.

SMO: Chibuikwe, your work called 'Dolphin' has quite an interesting story.

CU: When I was making the sketch for this work I decided to paint both the glasses and the figure. This was during the festive season but there was also so much death around at that time and so it was like people were becoming statistics without distinguishing characteristics. The news would just report deaths in numbers and it was becoming very normal. I was exploring the reporting of statistical deaths while singling out specific characteristics like nationality. Sometimes I ask people if they noticed the man in the painting laying down and they mostly say they don't, but when I ask them to identify the brand of



Dolphin, Oil, oil stick on canvas
2018, 137 x 106.5 cm



Graphic Violence, Oil, oil stick, spray
paint on canvas
2018, 152 x 137 cm

sunglasses in the painting, they immediately say 'Rayban'. Also at the time a Dolphin had just washed ashore and a friend showed me the video so I just felt like everything fit and named the work 'Dolphin'.

SMO: What about this work here; 'Graphic Violence'?

CU: I got inspiration for this work from Facebook where some images don't open because they contain graphic violence. So written on the work are the words "this image cannot be displayed because it shows graphic violence" which I lifted from Facebook. It also reminded me about the Belgian King Leopold and his atrocities in the Congo. People in Brussels were practicing something called "the great forgetting" which I found ridiculous. Trying to "forget" the atrocities which had been committed.

SMO: Promise we have some of your older works here like 'Parallax of Paradigms'

PO: Yes, I was reading about how consciousness shifts. There was a time when everyone believed that the earth was flat. Then Copernicus came along to tell everyone that the earth was actually round and he was almost killed for it. But after a long time and a lot of research a common consensus was reached that the earth was indeed round. So no matter how rooted some of these ideas are, at the end of

the day a wind of change and enlightenment will cause these paradigms to shift, so the question becomes are we going to accept that shift or are we going to live in denial?

SMO: Interesting. I can see the paradigm shifting. I can see the wave moving

PO: This is the first wire mesh work I did. I did it by gluing pieces of the canvas together on the wire. It is a reminder that this is where I started from.

SMO: There is also something very architectural about this.

PO: I was looking at how deeply rooted ideas are and at a point it starts to build up and bulge out like a building.

SMO: Now I'm going to ask you Promise to pick a favorite painting by Chibuïke in this exhibition and vice versa and tell me why.

CU: For me it is the four paneled work titled 'A Thin Line between Heaven and a Game of Chance'. I like it because although I've seen it before, the technicality of it looks impossible to me. The first time I was in his space I was able to really see his expansive oeuvre and it was love at first sight to see the way he makes those abundant lines.

PO: For me it's the boy with kid goat.



Parallax of Paradigms, Mixed media
2014, 132 x 129 cm

One thing I learned from Ikwuemesi is that if you can't create one very large piece, just put them in panels and then put them together. The fact that it's a dyptic with one piece on top and another below is very interesting to me. I love what he does but I can't do it. I can't be okay with leaving a painting with one arm incomplete or I'm painting an eye that isn't properly aligned. I have to correct it. But that he can do all of that and the work still comes out amazing is something I admire.

SMO: So now I'm going to ask you to give each other a serious word of advice,

PO: Okay, I'll advise Chibuiké to never ever burn his paintings again (laughter).

CU: I don't think I can promise that. There's also a pleasure I get from seeing the work burn if it doesn't come out right. And I don't have the temperament to go back to work on it. I like the first vitality of a work.

SMO: So what is your advice to Promise?

CU: Just keep doing what you're doing brother even though some people may not understand it. Until you find yourself in that gratifying place that naturally fuels your creativity, just don't compromise.

SMO: In conclusion what is your

prayer for this exhibition?

CU: I really want people to come see what I'm about and what I've been doing all this while. I honestly don't know when next I'll do anything here. Without tooting my own horn, I want Nigerian collectors to recognize our effort and put a tag on the works. These are timeless pieces.

PO: The idea of having an exhibition with Chibuiké has been a long time coming and this happening is my number one prayer answered! Besides people coming to enjoy the exhibition and collect the works, I want people to also have the opportunity of expanding their consciousness and awareness. I want them to think outside the box.

SMO: Thank you very much for this wonderful conversation!







Dreaming Embryo, Acrylic on canvas, 2015, 79.5 x 131.5 cm

CURATOR



Sandra Mbanefo Obiago is a multi-faceted writer, photographer, poet, art collector & curator, and award winning filmmaker. She has curated art shows and worked with the local creative industry to promote the best of Nigerian art.

She ran the communications program in Sub-Saharan Africa for environmental group, WWF International for eight years before founding and running Communicating for Change, a media for development social enterprise in Nigeria for fourteen years. She is a social activist and her campaigns, films, radio programs and publications have touched on themes such as human rights, women's empowerment, health including HIV & AIDS, environment, democracy and good governance. She organized conferences, workshops, and symposia for Nigeria's growing film industry and helped develop a course on Media Enterprise at the Pan African University.

Obiago produced and directed many films over the years, including a five-part documentary film series, Red Hot: Nigeria's Creative Industries, featuring artists from the film, music, performance and visual arts sectors. She was Associate Producer of the feature film, Half of A Yellow Sun, adapted from the award winning novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

She has been involved in many community initiatives and served as a trustee of the Convention on Business Integrity (CBI), was a member of the Advisory Council of the Nigerian National Film Institute and has served as a member of the jury of the Nigeria Media Merit Awards. Obiago is a Fellow of the Aspen Institute's African Leadership Initiative for West Africa (ALIWA) and has served as Sunday School teacher since her teens. She received an M.A in Telecommunications from Michigan State University, and a Bachelor of Education degree in English and German from the University of Manitoba, in Canada. She is happily married with three children.





Having opened its doors in May 2008 Temple Muse is West Africa's leading luxury concept store focusing on designer home & giftware, fashion & accessories as well as art & design. Our strength not only lies in offering the very best of world-renowned brands, but also in nurturing homegrown talent from across the continent.

The iconic flagship store equipped with its very own champagne bar is located in the heart of Lagos and possesses a "gallery-like" open feel, where clients can relax & indulge in all things wonderful.

Over the years Temple Muse has developed a reputation as being one of the leading art spaces in Nigeria having hosted a number of critically acclaimed exhibitions, and through continuously offering its clients cutting edge contemporary art.

www.temple-muse.com





SMO Contemporary Art specializes in showcasing contemporary art in non-traditional exhibition spaces, focusing on established and emerging artists based in Africa and the Diaspora.

SMO priority areas include art curating, research and documentation, valuation, events, film and photography, training and artist talks. SMO has expertise in organizing exhibitions & events which provide a platform for the creative industry to inspire and strengthen humanity's aspiration for the good society.

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