

Six Nigerian artists on Beirut journey into Contemporary African Art



Resolutions by Duke Asidere (Oil on Canvas 122 x 244 cm, 2019).

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Painting, sculpture, installation and mixed media works by Duke Asidere, Rom Isichei, Chidi Kwubiri, Gerald Chukwuma, Adewale Alimi and Suraj Adekola are the current poster-face of art from Africa, in the Middle East.

The artists' works, which are on show in Beirut, Lebanon, boost the increasing appreciation of African art across the world.

Organised as part of Beirut Art Week, the exhibition titled, *The Journey into Contemporary African Art*, opened on September 17 and continues till November 1, 2019.

According to the host, Belvedere Art Space, the show is its third collective exhibition.

In the past six years or more, art from Africa, particularly that of Nigerian artists, has been consistently shown at Art Dubai, in UAE.

The current interest in art from Nigeria by a Beirut-based gallery, perhaps, took its energy from the steam that African artists have been creating at Art Dubai, every year.

All the exhibiting artists of the Beirut show belong in the contemporary Nigerian period, but each represents the diversity of the country's postmodern art.

At individual level, each of the artists, in the past, had shown outside Nigeria, but the Beirut group exhibition is their first in Lebanon. As the show was still on, the artists returned to Nigeria and shared their Beirut experience.

Based in Cologne, Germany, Kwubiri is an artist whose painting of mostly large canvases in grainy or pointillism technique, continues to thrill aficionados, so explain his works for the show viewed via soft copies.

"It was an opportunity for me to show among the best of Nigerian artists," Kwubiri enthused during a chat in Lagos. "The curatorial aspect was more spacious in mounting the works," he noted, adding, "the exhibition was the talk of the town in Beirut."

He described the opening as attracting good prospects from the visitors. "It was not much about selling, but the responses from visitors was massive and satisfying to me."

He recalled his reluctance to be part of the show when the organisers contacted him. "I was a bit pessimistic initially," but soon got "impressed by the level of organisation and how the exhibition eventually turned out."

In its gallery statement, the art space described Kwubiri's art as energising hope against volatile issues surrounding global migration. The gallery added that "his bold interpretations also touch on the impact of music on global youth movements by interpreting cross-generational rhythms, culture and political consciousness."

Asserting the diversity of the group show is Asidere's inclusion. His works of cubism style with mostly ladies themes, which is well revered in Nigeria also lifts the group show. "Though it's one show, but we all have different experiences to share," Asidere stated.

Taking artists outside the shores of Nigeria for exhibitions always comes with some challenges, both for artists and the gallery involved. For the Beirut show, there was no uniformity in contracts, for all the artists, Asidere explained. "I have a contract specification with the gallery and I believe my colleagues have too, but each of us has different definitions with the organisers."

Most times, an artist does not know how far his works have travelled across the world until experiencing a big international exposure. Asidere recalled how he reconnected with a collector in Beirut, over two decades after. "She had bought my work over two decades ago, but flew in from Riyadh to Lebanon after reading a preview about this exhibition."

The gallery noted how Asidere's canvas emits commentary on "human drama" within his immediate socio-cultural and political environment.

Asidere's expression, the host said, blossoms "through headless or limbless figures and faces of strangely hybrid beings to densely populated urban landscapes, accentuated with thick strokes of vivid color, simplicity of form and expressive lines."

The Beirut show boosted Chukwuma's international profile, particularly in 2019. Earlier this year, a U.K.-based gallerist, Kristin Hjellegjerde and Gallery 1957, in Accra, Ghana had shown his works in the artist's first solo there. His works also featured in KUBATANA, a show of 33 African artists from May 4 to September 22, 2019 at Vestfossen Musuem, Norway.

Chukwuma, an artist with growing experience in non-regular materials, noted that the group show in Beirut "was a well organised and attended exhibition." While appreciating his earlier international experiences in the year, Chukwuma noted that the Beirut show gave him "really great opportunity for cultural exchange and especially another arena to tell my story."

On Chukwuma, he said the artist applies "multitude techniques" such as burning of woods, chiseling, and painting to "capture a richly layered history imbedded with personal and political meaning." His work, basically, highlights "movements of people through voluntary and forced migration as a vital stage in the progress of our collective humanity."

Isichei's work of diverse themes and experiments in styles and techniques, over the decades, have earned him a reputation, particularly among art aficionados, within Africa and diaspora. For the Beirut gathering, he showed one work of large scale canvas titled, Bring Back My Yesterday.

Textured in what he coined 'grains of dust technique', the painting depicts a veiled young boy captured "in a supplicatory repose."

The artist's thoughts explain the period of youth and self discovery when "hypothetical entreaty" restores the past. More salient in food for thoughts in the painting is its relevance for today's youth. The artist argued that being "peerless and fitting into every template is not a fact of existence."

Isichei, a Lagos-based artist with quite a number of international experiences saw A Journey into Contemporary African Art as having "sublime spectacle."

Apart from being an artist showing in Beirut, he left the city with something else. "As a first time visitor to Beirut, I was overwhelmed by its charm, history, and hospitality- both of our hosts and natives."

Described by the host gallery as "a conceptual artist whose practice has persistently engaged object and material exploration," Isichei's strength in composition also "evokes contemplation and engender dialogue."

Among his focus, the gallery noted, include "identity and culture, failures and insecurities, less and excess, loneliness, rapture and gaiety, and other emotional 'gestures' within our contemporary commune."

Adewale, who is well known for his painting in Lagos, ventured into the avant-garde in Beirut, showing sculptures and installation.

Elated that the exhibition focused on Africa, Adewale argued that artists from Nigeria "have good prospects, but lack of international exposure had been the hindrance to many of us."

The opening day of the exhibition, he recalled, "had over 1000 visitors."

Ahead of the exhibition, the preparation in Lagos did not suggest that the artists would be showing together.

For Adewale, such arrangement was “very interesting. “Initially, all of us did not know we were going to show together. Yes, each artist knew he would be showing in Beirut, but had no idea with whom until later during the preparation.”

The artist’s combination of the avant-garde and traditional forms within the context of contemporaneity is noted by the gallery in what has been described as “profusion of rich texture and often uncommon sculptural finish.”

The show organiser explained how the artist “incorporates elements of minimalism and abstraction to create an artwork that is distinctly current.” Adewale, the gallery statement added has applied his practice to “explore urban issues as well as painting the sorrows and joys of African women.”

The uncommon presence of the artists’ show in Beirut was related by Adekola: “The audience believed that they have not experienced such a show before.”

He noted that there was another exhibition going on simultaneously within the same area in Beirut. “But our show stole the audience.”

Speaking on the prospects of artists from Nigeria, Adekola who is one of the youngest on the trip argued that the art market is growing with so many young and vibrant talents.

Adekola’s past international exposures included Bonham’s African art auction in London, Piasa African Art auction in Paris and Geneve Encheres in Switzertland.

The strength of Adekola’s art in documenting Nigerian culture was highlighted by the host. The artist’s application of “light, colour, texture, energy and subtle emotion in his paintings,” was highlighted.

The organisers’ view about the exhibiting artists and art from Africa generally was not strictly based on observations by outsiders. Works of the artists and others in Nigeria, according to sources, were very known to the local agents of the gallery in Lagos.

Excerpts from the art host’s statement explained this much. “The beauty of African art can deliver various feelings and messages, however true appreciation can only arrive through a comprehension of the culture and environment that influenced the art.”

In Africa, art was seldom used for decorative purposes, but rather to give life to the values, emotions and daily customs of the various ethnic groups throughout the continent. The result has always been a fascinating art form that speaks to the viewer of the present turmoil while evoking a rich cultural past.

“Their artworks convey diverse global subjects such as urbanism, migration, culture, identity and women, in a unique African spirit, rich in composition, colour, texture, material and expression.”