

Art & Design

A CLOSE-UP ON THE ARTISTS, ARTISANS
AND ARCHITECTS ENLIVENING OUR WORLD

Tonia Nneji's
Sit and Listen
(2020), acrylic oil
on canvas



IN FOCUS

Seizing a Moment

The beguiling, dynamic disposition of Lagos is part of why Nigeria's art scene is emerging so quickly into the global spotlight. By Tom Burson



Rufai Zakari's *The Girl in Yellow Swimming Costume* (2020), mixed media, shown at December's Art X Lagos

Lagos is nothing if not confrontational, a constant work-in-progress where daily chaos supersedes any sense of structure – and sanity. It's a melting pot of ethnicities, a place where age-old tribal feuds pause for Alté dance parties and plates of puff-puff. There's a reason novelist Chinua Achebe famously wrote, "Being a Nigerian is abysmally frustrating and unbelievably exciting." The city has long served as the country's (and, arguably, the continent's) centre of commerce, music and fashion, but it's only recently that Lagos' fyke has latched a solid base of local artists, collectors and gallerists who are poised to establish the art ecosystem on the international stage.

Fashioned by a growing contingent of young, political and hyper-aware creators, the city's contemporary art is taking such a prominent role in the global market in part because it is so intensely relevant at home, where it reacts to – and plays a part in – the fraught battles for identity and power that take place every day across this most populous of African states, with more than 200 million people.

"The country is going through a cultural renaissance," says Adenrele Sonariwo, the young founder of Rele Gallery (*rele.co*), one of Lagos' leading contemporary art spaces, who studied in Washington DC and worked at PwC before transitioning to the art world. "A lot of the art being created today is profound and important because it speaks to the perspective of a new generation," says Sonariwo. It's an outlook,



Ajire (2020), acrylic, oil and charcoal on canvas, by Nigerian artist Collins Obijiaku

Below: Lagos photographer Anthony Obayomi captures a candlelight ceremony as part of the #EndSARS protests in October 2020

she says, that is "grappling with local and international issues in an increasingly interlinked world."

Nigeria is not a country known for its reticence of expression, from the titans of literature like Achebe and Nobel Prize-winner Wole Soyinka to one of the globe's best music scenes and the ever-expanding Nollywood, producer of the second-most films in the world after Bollywood. But the delayed emergence of a settled marketplace for the visual arts has meant that the country's leading voices have largely gone elsewhere to achieve



PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY INSERT GALLERY AND ART X LAGOS; COURTESY ED CROSS FINE ART AND ART X LAGOS; © ETINOSA YVONNE

Boy From the Other Side (2020), acrylic, oil and charcoal on canvas, by Nigerian artist Eniwaye Oluwaseyi



recognition, from curator Okwui Enwezor, who remains the only person to curate both the Venice Biennale and Documenta, to diasporic artists like Wole Lagunju and Njideka Akunyili Crosby, whose high-priced works are almost exclusively sold at European and American galleries.

The foundation of the emerging local scene was laid in 2007, when curator Bisi Silva created the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos (ccalagos.org) and Indian collector Kavita Chellaram launched the country's first auction house Arthouse Contemporary Lagos (arthouse-ng.com). It was nearly a decade later that Art X Lagos (artxlagos.com) became West Africa's largest art fair, joined soon after by the Lagos Biennial (lagos-biennial.org). Galleries such as Rele, Bloom Art (bloomartlagos.com) and SMO Contemporary (smocontemporaryart.com) played their part as well, springing up across Ikoyi, the city's most fashionable neighbourhood, thanks to ambitious visionaries like Sonariwo who were able to see the city's untapped potential.

"There are so many stories to tell, so much to capture here," says Tokini Peterside, founder and CEO of Art X Lagos and one of the most influential proponents of African art globally. "That's why the art coming out of Lagos is unique – documenting a city like this, that's so full of contradictions, that can take you high today and incredibly low tomorrow," she says. "I see those changes in the city within their work."

Take the portraits of painter Tonia Nneji, which explore feminine taboos in conjunction with societal oppression within Nigeria. "The role of an artist is to enhance community engagement and bring important, often-overlooked issues to the public eye," she says, explaining that she hopes her works can help inspire women out of their emotional shells. Kwara-based painter Eniwaye Oluwaseyi



The Power of Black And White (2020), acrylic and collage on canvas, by Dennis Osakue, part of London's Signature African Art gallery



A Poetry of Disgarded Feelings/Things (II) (2020), oil on canvas, by Chidinma Nnoli, part of the debut exhibition *Orita Meta* at Rele Gallery's new LA space

similarly sees engagement as paramount in his work: “It’s the job of an artist to document these times and not just talk about something imaginary but talk about something real or something currently happening.” The 26-year-old, self-taught artist, who sees himself less as a painter than a “critical observer”, takes this mission seriously in his current projects, which include critiquing the concept of “blackness” through the lens of discriminated albino communities.

It’s this idea of artist as archivist, especially in response to the #EndSARS protests that overtook the country in late 2020, that is fuelling the current spirit. “Creatively, I see a reawakening of political arts, by and accessible to young people,” says photographer

Anthony Obayomi, whose works document the continuous and constant changes he sees every day in his home city of Lagos. The pieces, which put a focus on storytelling to both conventional and non-conventional art audiences, have earned accolades from National Geographic as well as Switzerland’s Taurus Foundation. “I witnessed a different Nigeria,” he says, “even for me who was born here, it is was an alternative perspective to how I saw



Nigerian artist Eniwaye Oluwaseyi prepares a work for his ADA Contemporary show, *The Politics of Shared Spaces*

myself and other young Nigerians who united across cultural and religious differences to fight for a common cause.”

For many artists, their contribution to the #EndSARS protests was their artwork. “Because we are born in this environment, where the social and political climate is unpredictable, you’re inspired by that,” says photographer Etinosa Yvonne. “So, we want to inspire other people to drum issues like this.” It’s impossible, in this context, to understate the importance social media has played in establishing this current moment, where anyone, anywhere in the world can witness the energy, vibrancy and fearlessness with which these artists are telling – or rather retelling – the stories of their country.

Globally, the demand for works from on-the-ground artists – those who live through the daily power cuts, the petty corruptions, the non-stop noise of frenzied hawkers – is only growing. Rele Gallery, for instance, has just opened up a space in Los Angeles, while last year, the city’s Signature African Art (*signatureafricanart.com*) opened a sister gallery in London’s Mayfair. The most recent in-person edition of Art X Lagos drew representatives from institutions as varied as Tate Modern, the Smithsonian and Centre Pompidou.

“Nigeria’s art scene has continued to establish itself as an art hub for itself and the continent,” notes Touria El Glaoui, founder of 1-54 (*1-54.com*), the world’s leading African art fair. “Lagos, in particular, has led the way.” She continues, with increasing enthusiasm: “I can only see this continuing and strengthening. Nigeria has long had the cultural foundations to do so and we are seeing increased investment in educational arts spaces, which is vital. Likewise, increasingly permanent global links are being established, such as Yinka Shonibare’s Guest Artist Space being built in Nigeria.”

Back in the city, Oluwaseyi is similarly optimistic: “This is a new time for us, and I’m glad we’re taking this opportunity to create great works,” he says. “Honestly, I don’t see this ending any time soon. Not in this lifetime.” ♦

ACCRA ASCENDANT

West Africa’s other art centre is making strides on a global scale

“Ghana is, I think, where Lagos was six years ago”, says Adora Mba, a curator, collector and gallerist who recently opened Accra’s Ada Contemporary Gallery (*ada-accra.com*). “People are seeing how well Ghanaian artists are doing internationally. Once we reach that understanding, that art is beneficial socially, economically, and we start building more, I think Ghana will actually surpass Nigeria as an art hub”. It’s quite an optimistic claim from Mba, but she isn’t wrong about the relatively small country’s outsized global prominence. In the last year alone, a slew of local talent has made the international rounds. Take painter Amoako Bofo, who has gone from a little-known local talent in 2018 to one of the most buzzworthy artists in the world. Add in the unsuspecting rises of Gideon Appah, Zohra Opoku as well as a brand-new studio space in Tema from internationally beloved Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui, and there’s plenty to uncover. Another required stop on any Accra itinerary should be Gallery 1957 (*gallery1957.com*), which also makes regular appearances on the global art-fair circuit, while visiting artists themselves involves a journey to the seaside suburb of Labadi. Here, studio spaces for Serge Attukwei Clottey and Amoako Bofo are delightful stops, as is the Artists Alliance Gallery (*artistsalliancegallery.com*), a three-storey outlet for not only founder Ablade Glover’s own work but also the works of prominent local talents such as Owusu-Ankomah and George Hughes.



Boris Nzebo’s *Painting the Old Town* (2019), acrylic and posca on canvas, shown by Cameroonion Galerie MAM at Art X Lagos