





COMING HOME VICTOR EKPUK

9-30 APRIL, 2016

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On behalf of Arthouse - The Space, I am pleased to present a solo exhibition of celebrated artist Victor Ekpuk, entitled *Coming Home*. As the first artist in the newly created Arthouse Foundation residency programme, it has been a pleasure to work closely with the artist as he developed this new project in Lagos.

Victor Ekpuk is a Nigerian-born artist based in Washington, DC. Ekpuk came to prominence through his paintings and drawings which reflect indigenous African philosophies of the Nsibidi and uli art forms. Ekpuk reimagines graphic symbols from diverse cultures to form a personal style of mark making that results in the interplay of art and writing. His work frequently explores the human condition in society, drawing upon a wide spectrum of meaning that is rooted in African and global contemporary art discourses.

Victor Ekpuk spent four months in Lagos in 2015 as our first artist-in-residence, where he undertook a new artistic project and participated in public programmes during his residency. From his artist talk at the Kia Showroom to his interactive workshop with emerging artists, open studios, and Roundtable Discussion at the Goethe Institute, the art community in Lagos was able to get intimately acquainted with Victor Ekpuk's unique bodies of work. During his residency, Victor Ekpuk was inspired by the city of Lagos and experimented with three-dimensional forms, and this exhibition attests to the evolution of Ekpuk's artistic practice as he continues to explore African histories and symbols.

The Arthouse Foundation is a non-profit organisation that aims to encourage the creative development of contemporary art in Nigeria. Through a residency-based programme, the Arthouse Foundation provides a platform for artists to expand their practice and experiment with new art forms and ideas. By establishing a network that supports cross-cultural exchange between Nigerian and international artists, the Arthouse Foundation embraces contemporary art as an educational model to engage communities, promote social dialogue and advance the critical discourse of artistic practices.

As the Arthouse Foundation expands to a permanent residency venue, we look forward to welcoming future artists that follow in the footsteps of such a talented artist.

Sincerely,

Kavita Chellaram
Founder/CEO
Arthouse - The Space

The Appeal of Nostalgia: Victor Ekpuk's Coming Home

Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi

Coming Home is an apt title for Victor Ekpuk's first solo exhibition in Nigeria since leaving for the United States in 1999. The works in the exhibition are the result of a four-month creativity residency as the inaugural artist-in-residence of the Art House Foundation new initiative in the fall of 2016 and a previous three-month residency as a guest of the Omooba Yemisi Shyllon Foundation (OYASAF) in 2013. Literally speaking, they are his attempts to find himself in a world that he was once part of before expatriation. Though Ekpuk has been visiting Nigeria to replenish and re-affirm ties and commitments since he left, these visits were more or less personal, either family-related or for vacation. The two last visits were strictly for art and it was important for Ekpuk that he came value-free and with no preconceived ideas in the hope that the process of re-insertion and emplacement would inspire new ideas. The new body of work in the exhibition conveys his focused engagement with the Lagos and by extension, Nigerian social worlds.

It is important to remind ourselves how cathartic homecoming can be. The term is fraught in that it can involve physical, psychological, psychic, and imagined returns to a place invested with memory of self in relation to a community that is constructed in specific terms. This place, a site of belonging, identity and identification, was once forged by all manner of filial and material connections, close and remote. In corporeal terms, there is the sense that home coming is intended to give a kind of closure wherein old bonds are restored as memories are recuperated. This becomes even more striking given that Ekpuk's work revolves around the persistence of memory. Memory, in its manifold dimensions (personal, ancestral, imagined, speculative, etc), dictates his creative universe, and allows him to map roots that are then transmitted through appropriated and invented glyphs.

One might add that memory functions as a form of nostalgia for the artist. It is, as Svetlana Boym reminds us, "a sentiment of loss and displacement, but...also a romance with one's own fantasy."¹ Resulting from two Greek words, "nosto" (return home) and "algia" (longing), nostalgia is a stimulated state of envisioning home from afar. Whereas physical return can be restorative in dealing with trauma of displacement, imaginative return is more exploratory. It affords the luxury of virtual recalls, of wandering the lush landscape of ancestral or national home, sifting through measured fields of dreams filled with klieg lights of emotions of a bygone life. In his work, Ekpuk marries both physical and virtual return. This is because his consciousness is hardly displaced as, perhaps, that of someone commuted to life in exile, unable to make return journeys and therefore rely on conflicting sentiments of homeland. Ekpuk is also no incorrigible romantic. Instead he mediates spaces -- material and immaterial, local and universal, and national and transnational. Boym speaks of reflective nostalgia as that which enables one to occupy multiple places and different time zones all at once. Such is Ekpuk's own station. Memory, his most potent trope, allows the familiar and the tactile to meet fantasy, remembering, and imagination. Though hardly objective or foolproof,

memory serves an important motivation for collapsing time and space, past and present, dream and reality.

The old hag never tires of reenacting familiar dance steps goes a popular Igbo saying. It is safe to assume therefore that with familiarity and age comes dexterity. In that sense, she is not only refining old dance steps but also recreating and inventing afresh. The strength of the works in Coming Home, which range from two and three-dimensional paintings to sculptures, is that they test the depth of Ekpuk's imagination and creativity. They bear, as well, the instinctive and palpable certainty of a certified Omo Eko moving through old stomping grounds from Balogun to Surulere, Ikoyi to Oshodi, Ikeja to Mushin-Olosha, among other suburbs. The spaces with their many social habitudes in a rapidly transforming city served as fodders of inspiration for Ekpuk.

With the works, he relives old experiences, retraces steps, and creates new ones. Lagos's milieu de mémoire (apologies to Pierra Nora) is a unique muse that can inspire the most dour of artists and unimpressed of critics. The mega-city's booming commerce driven-modernity, an obstinate bedlam, is a vibrant kaleidoscope. It provides more than enough vistas of hardcore inspiration. Dis is Lagos (from the Lagos Suites, 2013) is eponymous in the sense that it is a summary of the city. Ekpuk employs basic visual tropes: conflation of peoples and the ubiquitous keke Napep commercial tricycle that is increasingly displacing the popular danfo bus which was once the most prominent avatar of Lagos in public consciousness. The work is composed of a dense pictorial surface. At the top (depending on the viewer's orientation), it is pitch black and tapers into a mélange of forms around the middle of the picture surface, and becomes vacant in the foreground (or bottom). Another work that operates within a similar aesthetic framework is the more gestural Cold Wata (also from the Lagos Suites, 2013). Both works, created during the OYASAF residency, reflect Ekpuk's graphics-driven language of figural abstraction, sparse and flat color plane, and calculated application of negative and positive spaces. It is refreshing to see that the artist continues to aspire to communicate with few but specific leitmotifs that the Lagos audience can easily identify.

Ekpuk draws upon icons, tropes, and ubiquitous imageries found in the public domain to construct narratives of place, to reflect on intimacy of space, and to feel the pulse of ordinary life. This is his zeitgeist and which he employed to great effect in previous creative residences elsewhere. During this time in Nigeria, it was mostly everyday people he encountered in transactional contexts such as in the market places, hawkers on the streets, and fashionistas at elite circles on the Island some of which are conveyed in the six large scale works that comprise the Head series. Returnee (2015) a personal reflection on the physical act of return, All Fingers Are Not Equal 2 (2015), and By the Grace of God (2015) which deeply captures the psyche and mood of a broken nation, are some of the other works in Coming Home. Ekpuk is at his irreverent best, offering social commentaries



Coming Home

up-close and from a critical distance, recalling in a way, a previous time well-spent in the newsroom of the old Daily Times as a cartoonist in the 1990s. In all these works, there is, certainly, a push toward a purer abstraction in ways never seen in previous corpora of work of the artist. Ekpuk's glyphs are now, more or less, emptied of meaning, and thus serve as mere embellishments with which he polishes the image surface. However, in the Icons series they take on embodied forms, pointing toward a new direction in the artist's practice; the experimentation with sculpture combined with color.

It was art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu who concluded that Ekpuk's script-based abstractions "anchors him to a specific historical and symbolic place," which virtually is Nigeria.² Although Ekpuk is now domiciled in the United States from where he struts the international art scene, he owes an immense debt to his country of birth. Coming Home is that opportunity for Ekpuk to reconcile his longing to re-engage a space so well-known like the back of his hands but which he has also grown distant from. That space has changed in unimaginable ways in the last 10 years from what it used to be when a struggling artist walked its streets. Yet for Ekpuk, nostalgia is not something edenic, that which sends beautiful jitters down the spine, or a mourning of the loss of an unreachable time. Instead it is the urgency to invent a place or be reinvented in a place that will always be home.

(Endnotes)

1. Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi is an artist, art historian, and Curator of African Art at Dartmouth College's Hood Museum of Art, United States. He holds a B.A. in Fine and Applied Arts from the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Nigeria; a postgraduate diploma in Museum and Heritage Studies from the University of Western Cape, South Africa; and a Ph.D. in Art History from Emory University, United States.

References: Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," *The Hedgehog Review* (Summer 2007): 7-18 [7] http://www.iasc-culture.org/eNews/2007_10/9.2CBoym.pdf. Accessed on January 30, 2016.

2. Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Contemporary African Artists and the Pan-African Imaginary: Skunder Boghossian, Kwabena Ampofo-Anti, and Victor Ekpuk," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 33, no. 1 (2013): 56-69 [66]

“Coming Home” is a very special exhibition for me. In 2013, when Arthouse Contemporary offered to host a solo exhibition of my works in Lagos, I proposed to come and do a residency in order to make the works at home.

I wanted my first solo exhibition in Nigeria in over a decade to be relevant to my experience of the place where I call “home”, the place where my career was launched. Even though I no longer inhabit this cultural, social, and geographical space, “home” still feeds my artistic imagination.

On arrival in Nigeria, I opened myself to the influences of my daily experiences and interactions with people in the society. I chose the perspective of a “Returnee”, an outsider looking in, while walking familiar streets and participating in familiar rituals of life in Nigeria. The goal was to let these experiences impact the outcome of the works I would make here.

Themes in my recent works have gravitated towards investigating an African belief of the human condition as predisposed by the condition of the metaphysical “Head”. As I traversed different socio-economic spaces, I found a common theme in the human condition; people are literally and metaphorically carrying things in and on their heads. The man at the bus stop screaming curses at the devil, the street hawkers carrying their wares on their heads, the fashionable women in Nigerian high society with their

wigs, weaves, and elaborates head-ties. Perhaps in Nigeria, there is a connection between the loads on the head and the resolve to absolutely live daily “By the Grace of God” as a response to their existence. These observations provided materials and forms for works in “Home Coming”.

Prior to coming to Nigeria, exploring lines in three dimensions had long occupied my thoughts and sketchpads. Four “Icons” are now realized sculptures, with the assistance of Etang Francis, my residency studio assistant, and Fidelis Odogwu, a Lagos-based metal artist. I look forward to expanding the scope of works in this genre.

The time spent, as an Artist-in-Residence at Arthouse Foundation was a very rewarding opportunity to “refuel”, experiment with new ideas, and mentor a young artist.

Thank you to Kavita and Amisha for inviting me and providing a great space; to Aditya for always answering my Lagos weekend socials SOS calls; and to Jackie and Amisha for the great parties. I am grateful to Nana, Sumbo, and Tonato, as well as all the Chellaram house staff, who ensured that the requirements for my living and work environments were sufficient. And to my family, old friends and new ones I met, you made my coming home a real treasure.

-Victor Ekpuk, 2016



Victor Ekpuk’s Itenerant Creativity: Expanding the *nsibidi* Repertoire within a Global Context

Kunle Filani (MFA, PhD)

Introduction

Victor Ekpuk affirmed in a conversation with Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi that identity is an ephemeral condition that is always in constant flux. This opinion on the issue of identity may be personal, but its philosophical import resonates the critical understanding of his art works.

In the morning of his career as an artist, Ekpuk’s rising sun glittered with adapted pictographic and ideographic scripts largely drawn from the *nsibidi* culture of the South Eastern Nigeria. His canvases were suffused with calligraphic and schematic images that were reminiscent of the symbolic visual communication of his ancestors especially that of the Ibibio and Efik communities in the present day Cross River and Akwa Ibom states of Nigeria. Unlike the concealed signs of the Ekpe secret society, Victor Ekpuk’s graphic representations are re-imaged secular relics of the esoteric codes of his forefathers. He however retained the inherent *nsibidi* communicative essence albeit within a modern sensibility.

When life is contextualized within the unfathomable universe, human identity becomes transient. The immensity and magnificence of both the physical and spiritual realities around us diminish the intellectual arrogance of man and society. When history and its narratives become dim with age, memory and imagination assume ephemeral status. It is perhaps around the above philosophical ambience that Victor Ekpuk situated his thoughts while proclaiming that identity is ephemeral.

The *nsibidi* tradition of visual communication through signs and symbols is ancient, it is therefore difficult to capture and retain the entire culture in today’s modernity since it is shaped by different circumstances. Victor Ekpuk nevertheless appropriated the creative significance of *nsibidi* to explore modern graphic possibilities and expand its contextual connotations through a series of residency networking and artistic participations that cut across cities, countries and continents. This is why for him the creative conditions are in a state of constant flux where a particular sign assumes different significance in another circumstance and culture.

Flux presupposes constant change and dynamic re-interpretation. Its characteristics include transient nature and elastic continuum – two seeming opposing binaries. Creative flux is often sustained by memory and imagination. The two in turn assume their own ultimate realities. Ekpuk had expanded our notion of critical theories of aesthetics by providing validated pictorial narratives that are inspired by history, memories, dreams and imagination. His creative search for the conscious and subconscious human/social conditions propelled him to explore through art both

individual and collective identities. Unlike his forms that are often reduced to minimal features, he also examined the essence of the spiritual self through the interrogation and re-imaging of identity and its identification sub-set.

Itenerant inspiration and mobile imagination

Victor Ekpuk is indeed a modern day artist who traverses borders to draw inspiration and leaves indelible graphic expressions on his trails. Having relocated from Nigeria in the late 1990s to explore the shifting modernity of Europe and America, Victor has worked in many cities in different countries across continents without losing his *nsibidi* identity or ossifying archaic traditions. The interesting result of his itinerary manifests in the typical Ekpuk’s mobile and organic lines and symbolic graphic forms and motifs. He however engages in nuanced re-imaging and re-engineering of concepts to suit the local ambience.

Coming home

The most recent of his creative exploits is at the Arthouse Foundation Artist Residency in Lagos, Nigeria. He has put up an exhibition aptly tagged “Coming Home” in order to properly document his efforts. It is important to stress that Victor Ekpuk is one of the few diaspora artists who constantly refills his inspirational repertoire by paying regular visits to his home-country, Nigeria. This visitation to the source is crucial for any creative mind that draws inspiration from, his or her roots. As earlier noted, time and space often erode historical narratives, and dims memories. For a veritable sustenance of artistic imagination for the itinerant creative personalities, there is need for a regular recourse to drinking from the living spring of cultural ties.

In this home-coming in particular, Victor Ekpuk became more conscious of the need to transcend the geometric basic platforms of two-dimensional representations by adding more contours and cantilevers thereby enhancing the visual architecture of his canvases. He also began to texture some of the canvases with high relief metal protrusions which equally expand the visual aesthetics of his works. The most significant of his experiments however, is the conceptual extraction of units of motifs from his drawings and paintings and transmuting them into slender linear metal sculptures. Victor Ekpuk in this exhibition is transcending not just the physical borders of continents, but more importantly, the creative borders of two-dimensional art into the more plastic three-dimensional realities.

The works done by Ekpuk during the 2015 Lagos residency centred mainly on the conceptual exploration of the human head both in its secular manifestations and its spiritual essence. It is actually a follow-up but more challenging interpretation of the 2015 London exhibition titled Portraits

which according to Juliet Highet, is a series of paintings and drawings exploring the essence of self. In the *Head Series* done in the last quarter of 2015 during the Arthouse Foundation Residency, Victor created more animating forms especially as he cut-out the basic shapes of the heads before filling colour and motif details.

A crucial point to note is his use of selected references which serves as the basic sources of inspiration. Ekpuk’s references are drawn from diverse sources such as traditional African sculptures, photographs of coiffures and head-loads and in some cases life models. He oftentimes subjects the referenced forms to rigorous re-imaging through a process of creative minimalism. He conceptualizes and re-imagines the forms to align with the new context, thereby generating new sets of values for the images.

Apart from the *Head Series* there are also other works that interrogated his social experience while in Nigeria. For example in a work titled *By the Grace of God*, he shaped the painting board in form of an abstract human figure in deep supplication with clasped hands. The cut-out form coupled with the tonal blending of colours gives an impression of robustness that evokes a three-dimensional plasticity. The dark brownish colouration with chequered patterns dominating the body of the work creates a gloomy situation that requires spiritual intervention for the desired succor. The painting is an abstract depiction of the self inflicted socio-political malaise that afflicted Nigeria since independence.

Dis is Lagos depicts the chaotic transportation system peculiar to Lagos; the economic nerve centre of Nigeria. With a teeming population of over fifteen million, Lagos is a sprawling city-state that is overwhelmed by grossly inadequate means of transportation and road network. A few years back, the Federal Government of Nigeria introduced tricycle mini buses popularly called “Keke NAPEP” or “Marwa” – The painting illustrates the fragile tricycle loaded with human cargoes, and painted in the official yellowish colour approved for commercial buses in Lagos. He contrasted the bus against a sea of heads impatiently waiting for vehicles that are scarcely available.

Most daring and perhaps the most rewarding of his recent experiments are the *Icon Series* constructed with thin metal rods and flat aluminum sheets. Victor Ekpuk had adopted and adapted some of his fluid organic motifs to create metal sculptures. When the *Icon Series* are placed against a white background, they create an impression similar to his normal drawings because of the linearity of forms and the mobile eloquence of the construction. The use of a variety of thin and fine metal rods accentuates the fluidity of lines. He creatively used flat metal plates to represent the heads of the images. The heads are made of ovals and semi-circular shapes with decorative spikes protruding around them. The heads are often painted with any primary colour of choice to complement the black lines of the minimized metal figures. The Icon images are seemingly biomorphic and chimerical. They are images generated from the land of dreams and fantasy. They therefore speak to our subconscious and penetrate our spirit essence.

Conclusion

Victor Ekpuk is very committed to his art practice and his penetrating gaze sees beyond mundane visualities. His expanded vision has generated series of dynamic interpretation of historical narratives that are coded in the

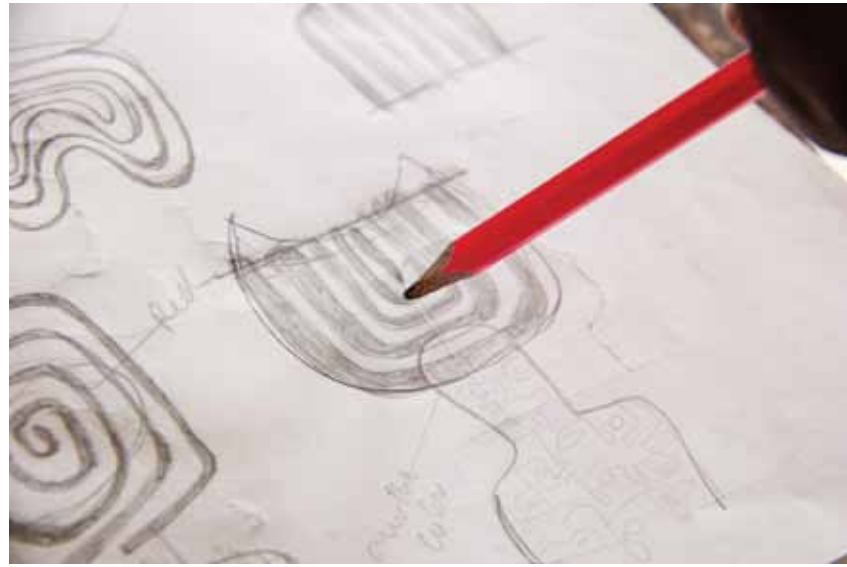
metaphor of memory. His intellectual faculty is constantly awake to rationalize concepts and render natural images to irreducible forms. His creative instinct traverses the nooks and crannies of continents, and like a rolling stone, he imbibes significant experiences that are re-interpreted and re-formalized into the *nsibidi* taxonomy.

Readings

Nzewi, Ugochukwu-Smith, “A conversation with Victor Ekpuk” Auto-Graphics Works By Victor Ekpuk, Hood Museum of Art Quarterly, Dartmouth College, Summer 2015

Ekpuk, Victor, Portrait, Sulger-Buel Lovell, London, 2015

Filani Kunle, Studio Visits to Victor Ekpuk in Lagos in November and December 2015.





Head 4, c. 2015.
Acrylic on wood
48 x 45 in. (122 x 114cm.)



Head 7, c. 2015.
acrylic on wood
48 x 41 in. (122 x 104.5 cm.)



Head 6, c. 2015.
Acrylic on wood
47½ x 27½ in. (121 x 70 cm.)



Uyai Iban 3, c. 2015.
Acrylic on wood
46 x 41 in. (117 x 104 cm.)



Head 3, c. 2015.
Acrylic on wood
68 x 38½ in. (173 x 98 cm.)



Head 5, c. 2015.
Acrylic on wood
57 x 30¾ in. (145 x 78 cm.)



Head 8, c. 2015.
Acrylic on wood
54 x 48 in. (137 x 122 cm.)



Returnee, c. 2015.
Acrylic on wood
48 x 36½ in. (122 x 91½ cm.)



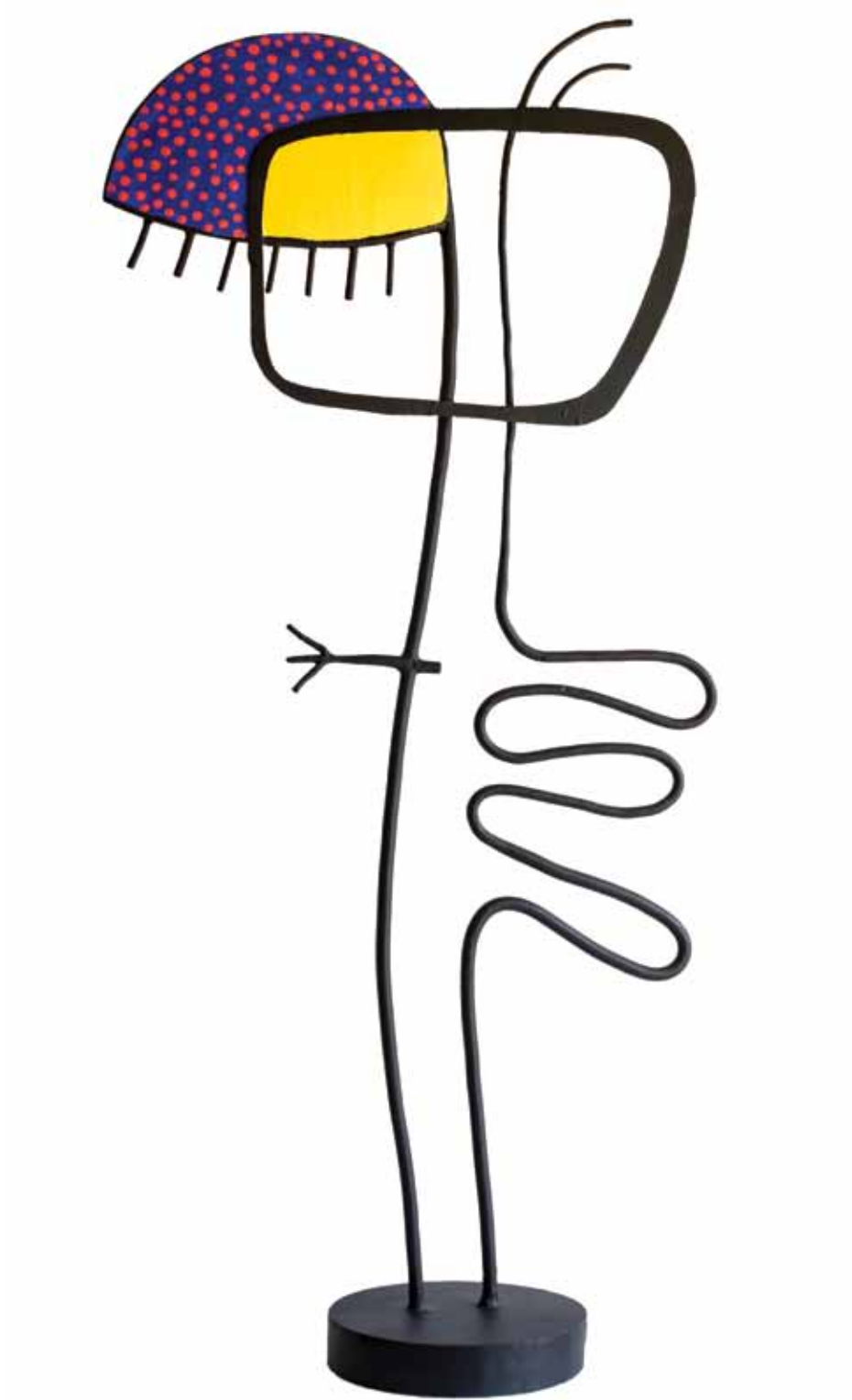
Head 2, c. 2015.
Acrylic and metal on wood
72 x 43½ in. (183 x 111cm.)



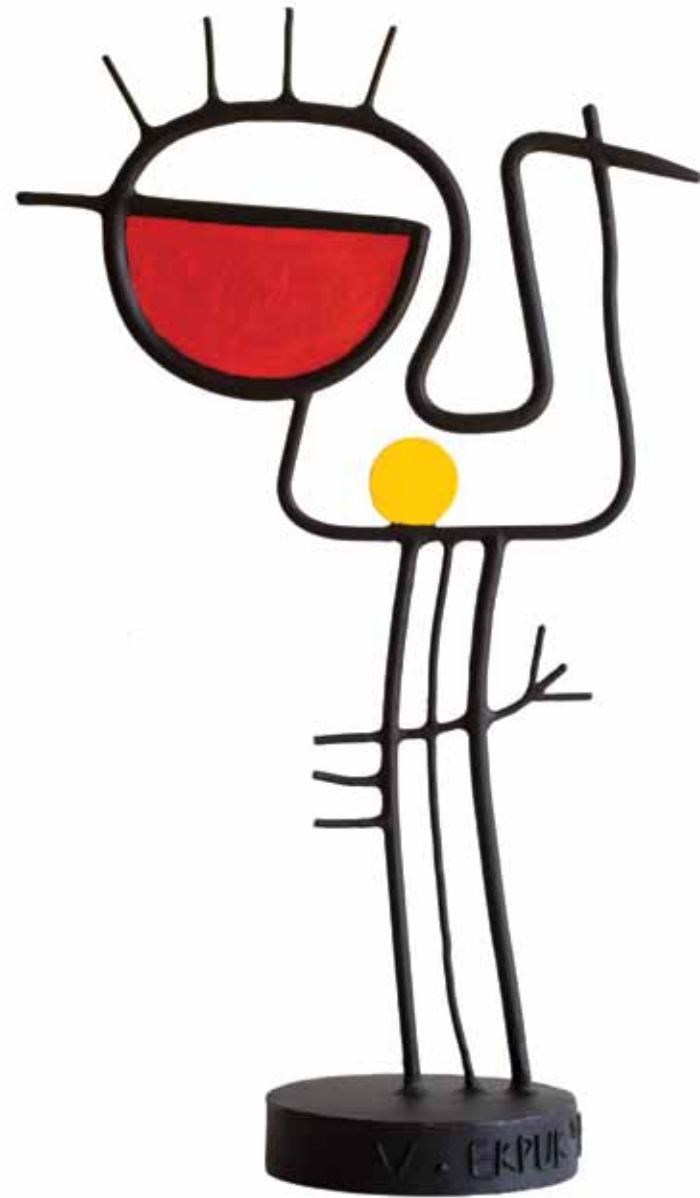
By the Grace of God, c. 2015.
Acrylic on wood
39¾ x 46 in. (101 x 117 cm.)



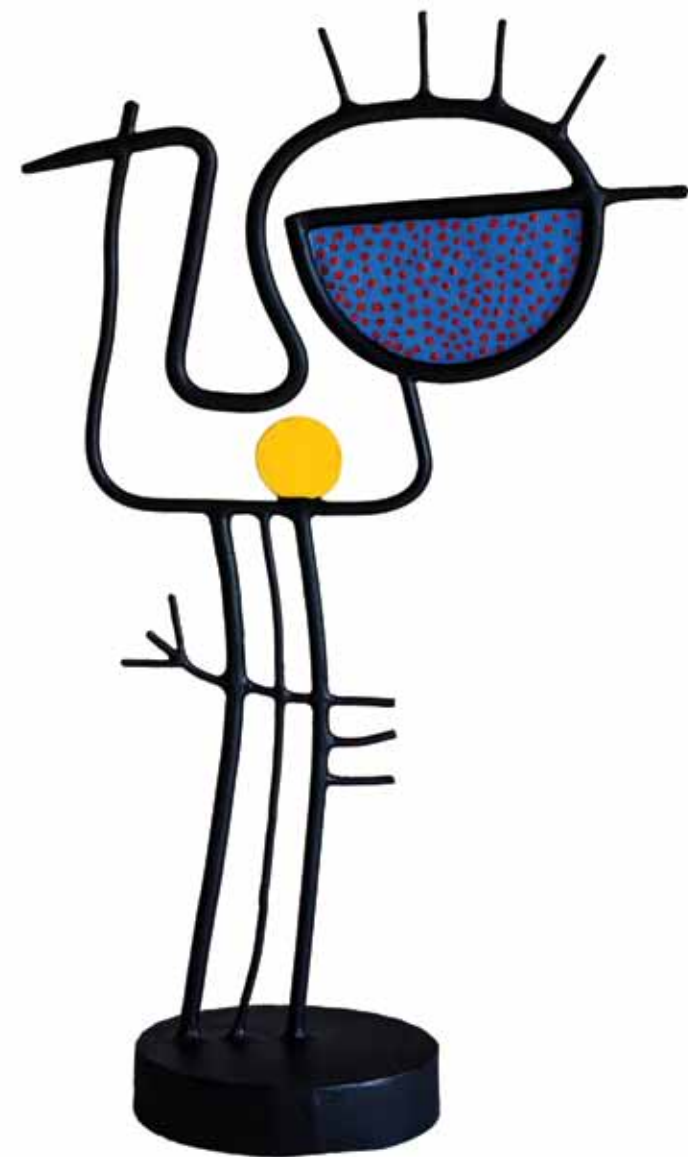
All Fingers Are Not Equal 2, c. 2015.
Acrylic on wood
80¾ x 48 in. (205 x 122 cm.)



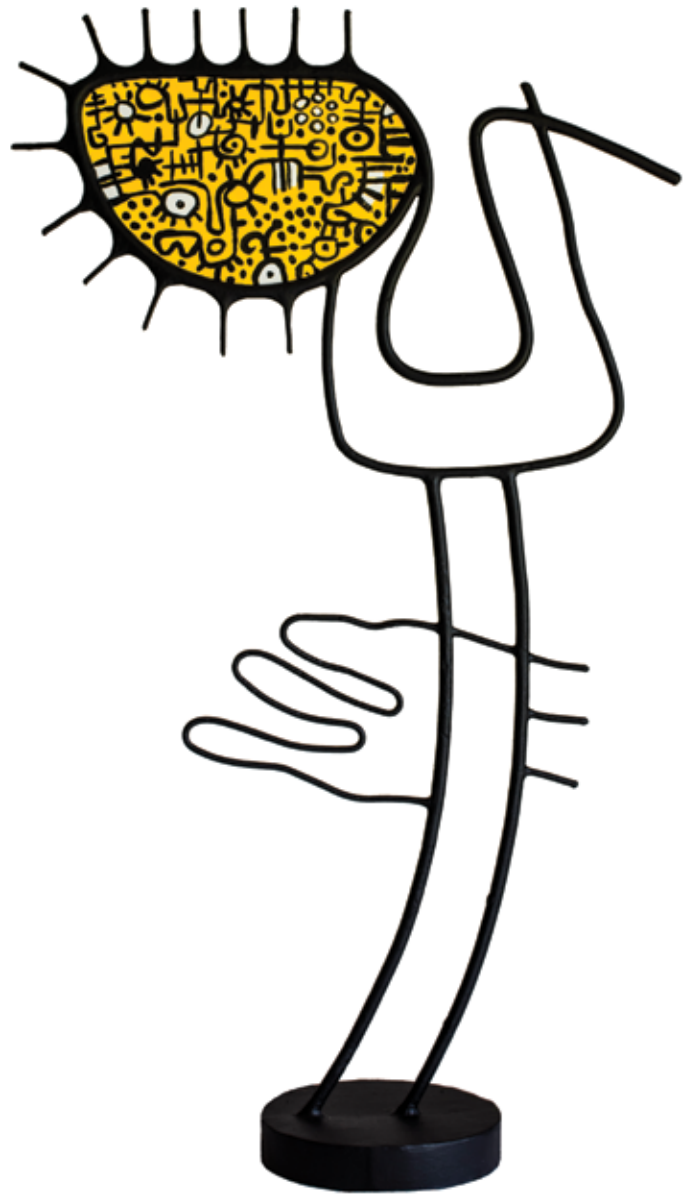
Icon 1, c. 2015.
Acrylic on metal
57 in. (145 cm.)



Icon 3, c. 2015.
Acrylic on metal
33 in. (84 cm.)



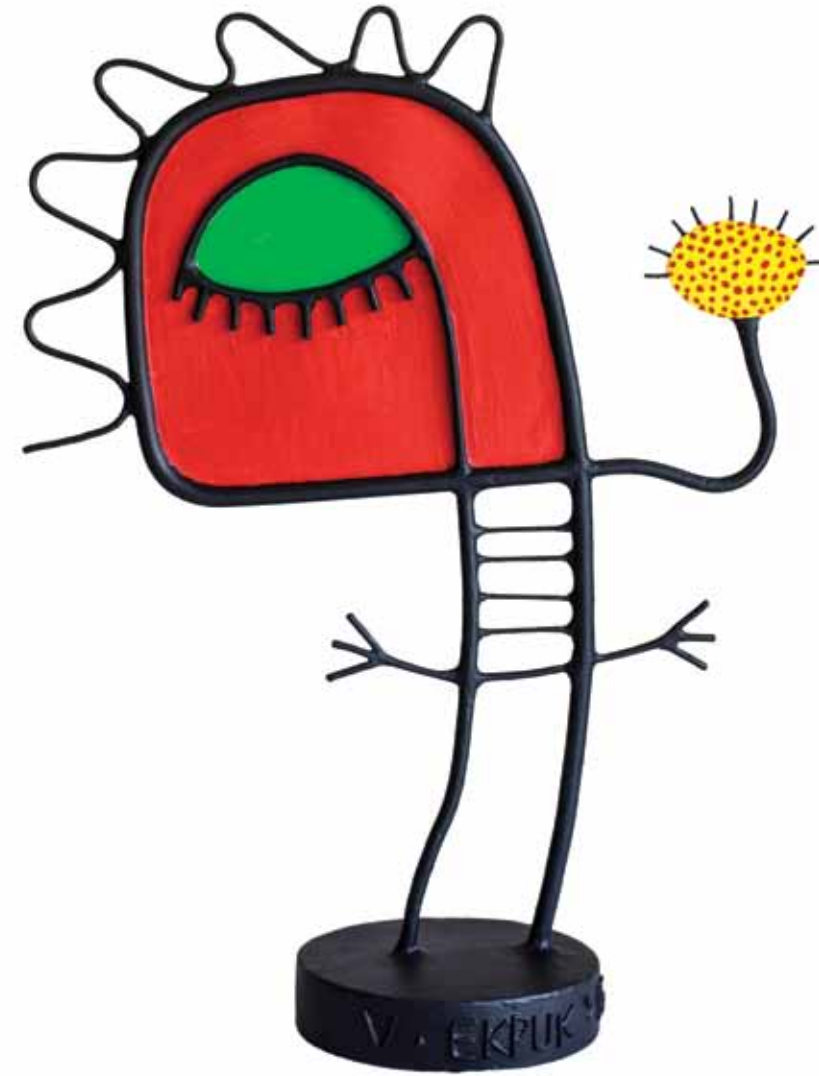
Icon 3, (flipside)



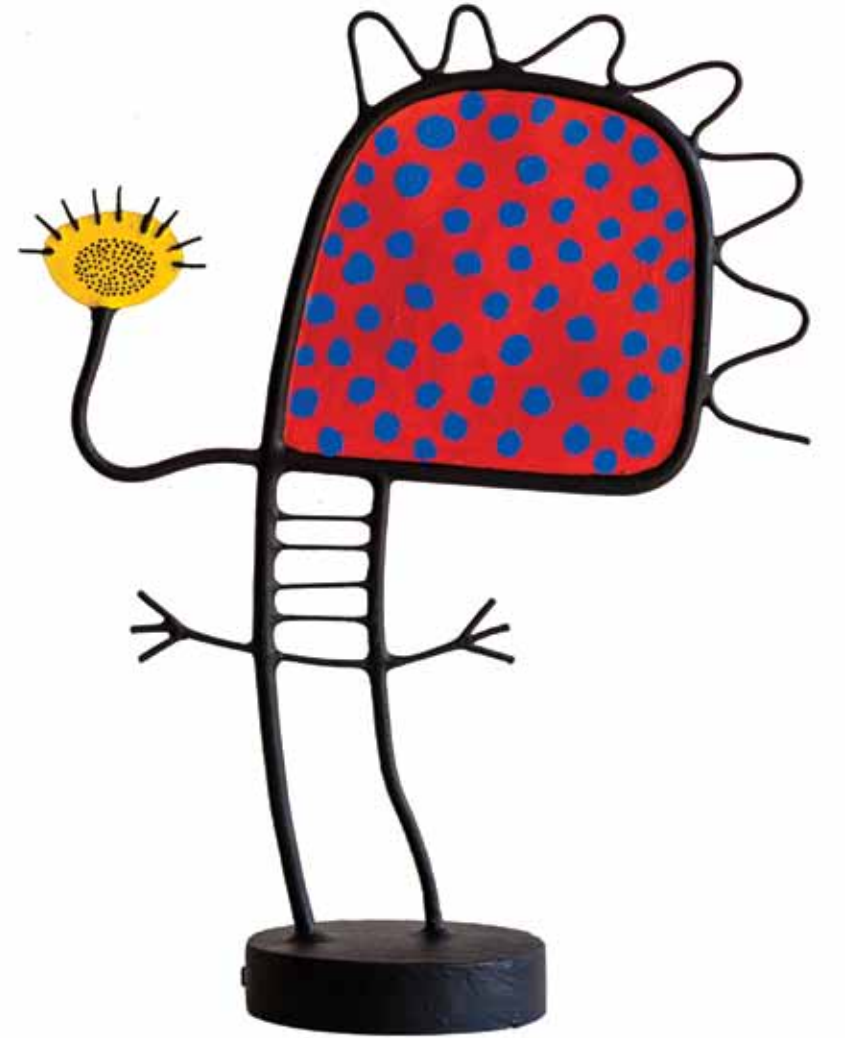
Icon 2, c. 2015.
Acrylic on metal
52¾ in. (134 cm.)



Icon 2, (flipside)



Icon 4, c. 2015.
Acrylic on metal
30 in. (76 cm.)



Icon 4, (flipside)



Big Fat Hen, After Wynton Marsalis, c. 2015.
Acrylic on wood
82 x 95 in. (208 x 241.5 cm.)



Dis Is Lagos! (Lagos suites), c. 2013.
Acrylic ink on paper
42 x 60 in. (106 x 152 cm.)



Cold Wata, (Lagos suites) c. 2013.
Acrylic ink on paper
42 x 60 in. (106 x 152 cm.)

Inspiration



Victor Ekpuk is a Nigerian-born artist based in Washington, DC. He is renowned for his glyph-like paintings and drawings that are inspired by the aesthetic philosophies of indigenous African art forms like nsibidi, uli, and graphic symbols from diverse cultures. Ekpuk reimagines these symbols to form a personal style of mark making that results in the interplay of art and writing.

His work frequently explores the human condition, drawing upon a wide spectrum of meaning that is rooted in African and global contemporary art discourses.

Ekpuk's works have been featured at the 12th Havana Biennial, Dakar Biennial, Hood Museum, Fowler Museum, Museum of Art and Design, Newark Museum, The World Bank, Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African Art, New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the 1st Johannesburg Biennial.

His artworks are in such collections as the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African Art, Newark Museum, The World Bank, Hood Museum, Krannert Art Museum, United States Art in Embassies Art Collection, and Fidelity Investment Art Collection.

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