COMING HOME
VICTOR EKPUK
9-30 APRIL, 2016
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
memory serves an important motivation for collapsing time and space, past and present, dream and reality. The old hog never tries to reenact familiar dance steps, a popular Yoruba 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 anew. The strength of the works in Coming Home, which range from two and three-dimensional paintings to sculptures, is that they hold the facets 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, Ibeju to Mushin-Oshora, among other suburbs. The spaces with their many social habits 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 Pierre Nora) is a unique muse that can inspire the most dour of artists and unimpressed of critics. The megacity’s booming commerce driven-modernity, an obstinate bedlam, is a vibrant kaleidoscope. It provides more than enough vistas of hardwired inspiration. Deia Lagos (from the Lagos Suites, 2013) is an anonymous 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 dolphin 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 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 planes, 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 imagery 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 residencies elsewhere. During this time in Nigeria, it was mostly everyday people he encountered in transactional contexts as well as in the market places, hawkers on the streets, and fashionistas at elite circles on the island where he was employed. In that sense, she is not only refining old dance steps but also recreating and inventing anew. The strength of the works in Coming Home, which range from two and three-dimensional paintings to sculptures, is that they hold the facets 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, Ibeju to Mushin-Oshora, among other suburbs. The spaces with their many social habits 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 Pierre Nora) is a unique muse that can inspire the most dour of artists and unimpressed of critics. The megacity’s booming commerce driven-modernity, an obstinate bedlam, is a vibrant kaleidoscope. It provides more than enough vistas of hardwired inspiration. Deia Lagos (from the Lagos Suites, 2013) is an anonymous 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 dolphin 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 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 planes, 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.
Coming Home

“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 weps, 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 Kani (MFA, PhD)

Introduction

Victor Ekpuk affirmed in a conversation with Ugochukwu-Smooth Nwuzo 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 sun glare with a direct photographic and landscape imagery 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 sacred 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 therefore around the above philosophical imagination that Victor Ekpuk articulated his thoughts while proclaiming that identity is ephemeral.

The nsibidi traditional 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 expand modern graphic possibilities and expand its contextual connotations through a series of residency networking and artistic participations that cut across cities, countries and continents. Victor Ekpuk’s reason for why the creative conditions are in a state of constant flux where a component of culture 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 seemingly opposing binaries. Creative flux presupposes constant change and dynamic re-interpretation. Its sustenance of artistic imagination for the itinerant creative personalities, space often erode historical narratives, and dims memories. For a veritable flux, the Federa...
Head 4, c. 2015.
Acrylic on wood
48 x 45 in. (122 x 114 cm.)

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