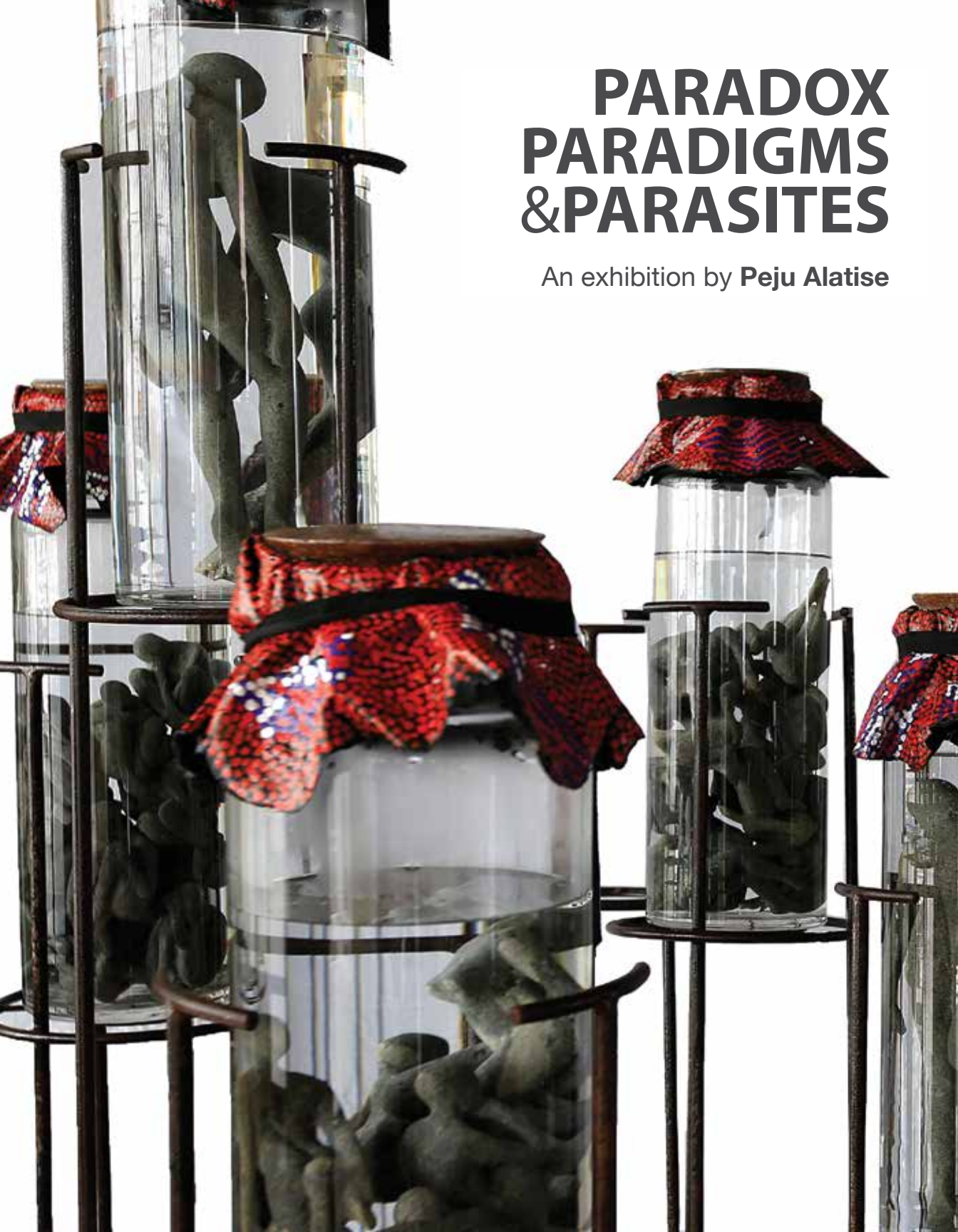


# PARADOX PARADIGMS & PARASITES

An exhibition by Peju Alatise



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An exhibition by **Peju Alatise**

April 26 – May 10, 2018

Kia Showroom  
308 Adeola Odeku Street  
Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria



**ARTHOUSE**  
THE SPACE



## FOREWORD

On behalf of Arthouse - The Space, it is with great honor and pleasure to present a solo exhibition by one of Nigeria's celebrated contemporary artists Peju Alatise. Titled 'Paradox, Paradigms and Parasites', the show marks Peju's 20 years practicing as an independent artist, in which she continues to experiment and master her art across a variety of media.

Peju Alatise trained as an architect and has evolved over the years through her writing, poetry, design, painting and sculpture. Her multidisciplinary approach extends to offer compelling reflections on important and often urgent subject matters ranging from equal rights, feminism, philosophy and politics.

A fellow at the National Museum of African Art, part of the Smithsonian Institution, Peju has had several solo shows, and her works are in private and institutional collections around the world. Last year alone she represented Nigeria at her first pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale and was the winner of the FNB Art Prize in Johannesburg.

We thank Peju for her trust in us while putting together this powerful exhibition. It has been our absolute pleasure working with you Peju. You are truly remarkable – beautiful inside and out!

We would also like to thank our sponsors for their continued support in promoting contemporary African art in Nigeria.

To the audience, we hope you enjoy this show much as we have enjoyed bringing it to you.

Sincerely,

Amisha Chellaram Hathiramani



## SILENCE

2017

Blown glass, water, stonecasts, textile, metal, wooden corks and acrylic paints

Bottled size, 24 h x 10 in. dia; metal stands vary in height

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

There are many analogies that describe this condition – the moth to a flame; the abused wife that never leaves – choosing to remain in Nigeria is like choosing to remain in an abusive relationship. I often joke about my grandmother nailing my umbilical cord to a tree in her backyard (this symbolises the wish of your ancestors for you to always return home). Nigeria is a country of ironies and contradictions. The biggest thieves are highly honoured. Big buildings situated on bad roads. Beautiful homes with poor garbage disposals. Biggest consumers with no factories. More churches than hospitals. Schools without libraries and libraries with no books...

My hairdresser says “if you complain, then what should people like myself do?”. People like her would spend all their savings to buy a ticket for an arduous journey to the likelihood of death, to get away from the country. A country where schools are becoming more dangerous for the girl child – like we need more reason to deter the average man from sending his daughter to school. The same place with family, friends, lovers, music, art and happy strangers that will share groundnuts with you on the street. Our Art has no museums and Music no concert halls. Our culture has the potential to be the biggest export but our politicians get fat on oils. Still we persevere. It is the comfort of the familiar that I stay for. The hope for change too plays tricks on my sensibility.

20 years and I still choose Nigeria.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS WITH OTSHOLENG POO

**Q1: As a non-conformist, who without fear of disapproval questions the status quo, which works created in protest do you feel unsettled your audience as it tackled said issue directly and without compromise?**

My most political body of works are found in 'Paradox, Paradigms and Parasites' with some of them yet to be shown publicly for the first time. Other works like 'Missing' which I made to effectuate the conversation on the casual reactions of our government and civilians alike to the plight of the kidnapping of female children, was approached with the severity of my intentions. It was shown in London at the 1:54 Art Fair and that created the awareness I felt the issue deserved. I realise people in Nigeria do not want to be confronted by many of the issues my works deal with. For them, I think art is a means of escapism to 'la-la-land' hence the requirements of pleasurable aesthetics and reminiscence is imposed on artists who compromise in difficult situations propelled by miniscule participation of government and private sector in the arts. The Nigerian audience can other times be predictable in the way of conservative views; this would be the greater challenge to an artist's willingness to compromise. I would admit that I have compromised when I thought a work may put me in harm's way. I also remind myself that the art I practice is a visual communication and I have a responsibility to be heard clearly with little misunderstanding. In my quest to be heard and understood, I create a work that is easier to approach. At this juncture, I will not call it compromise. What I do is simplify. This will not happen for much longer though. The 'Flying Girls' is the perfect example of what I describe. I believe it to be simple yet it is capable of stimulating the audience's attention. And it did! Does this change anything? I don't think so. I cannot see closely enough.

**Q2: The human species is a predominant feature in 'Paradox, Paradigms and Parasites'. What is it about the individual that draws you to literally create its form to represent the narrative?**

Before the body of works in 'PPP', my works did the opposite, it excluded the presence of the human body but it still represented the forms in other ways. This was the phase in my career where textile was my predominant medium. Back then it was intentional to exclude the individual and allow the textile to express the narrative in its place. The breakaway point from textile was the making of the work titled 'Constitution Door' where I felt the textile as a medium would fail the narrative, by not being able to deliver on the urgency of the issue. The issue at the time being the legalization of child marriages under other guises by the Nigerian senate. I think it was then I realized that textile for me was too subtle a medium to express desperate situations.

**Q3: Your position as an artist to reflect the times is often specific, much like the intention behind 'O is the new +' (2016) - your response to the angry mob that murdered four young men from the University of Port-Harcourt in 2012. The same can be said of the kidnapping of girls in schools, reflected in 'Sleep Deep' (2017), or the 'Silence' (2017) piece that tackles the migration crisis. In creating these purposeful works, what stirs your motivation to continue producing despite the severe and urgent subject matter?**

The answer is in the question. Severe and urgent subject matter is the motivation. There are many times my work does not provide urgent response on particular issues. In 2015, a boat full of African immigrants capsized in the Mediterranean leaving floating bodies in the sea like litter on a sidewalk to be picked by the European Union. Not a single word was uttered by any African leader. The

silence of the African governments begged for representation and I began my work to give that silence a visual presence. We are in 2018 and the work 'Silence' is finally completed but the shame of it is nothing has changed in the three years and our leaders stay mute. The slow progression of many countries on the continent make urgent and desperate issues prevalent and relevant for more years than necessary. Fela Kuti's music and lyrics remains relevant and sometimes predictive after several decades of its production. The song 'soldier come, soldier go...' is one such prophetic song that Nigeria's recycling of soldiers in power have validated. The song 'suffering and smiling' a favorite of mine, calls out the oppression of religious and political leaders and the willingness of the oppressed to be abused. Nothing has changed in 30-something years. The question I want an answer to is 'how can one exist in middle of the crisis on our continent without engaging?' I know it is possible if you have no love for the place. But! This love is like the care of a mother with a terminally sick child.

I hate to feel helpless or incapable of reaction. The works I create are my voice on the subject of our crisis.

**Q4: In titling the work that deals with the migration crisis, 'Silence', you highlight the alarming muteness by African leaders. The lack of condemnation of Africans enslaving each other has not caused the outrage it warrants and the people affected by these exodus events remain silenced. The viewer is called to witness the bodies trapped in these bottles. Was it a conscious decision to confront spectators with the 'lifeless' bodies that are most often ignored, locally and internationally, largely because of their place of origin?**

It was a deliberate effort to confront the viewer

with a bottle tightly corked. It is the direct representation of the phrase 'put a lid on it' or 'put a cork in it'. This you see before the content of the bottle. On closer inspection, the lifeless bodies take place and the controversies begin.

In Nigeria, a dead body is called a dead body, not an African body, not a black body, just a body. When this body is found outside of its 'apportioned geographical boundaries' the characterizations and classifications begin. This is the bias of a world that is obsessed with separation/division. The obsession of identification. African leaders have been mute since the mass exportation of its children as slaves. The willingness of a person to choose perilous journey and possible death in the Mediterranean Sea than exist in their country homes, proves the desperation created by the same leaders. As an artist from the African continent it only makes sense that I create works in my likeness, right? My images will represent 'my people' and I am subliminally (and otherwise) responsible for whichever way they are represented or perceived. This burdensome responsibility I do not think a European artist shares. Am I to censor myself in order to not offend an already biased audience? My work is put into ulterior context once my origin as the artist is determined? Yet my sculptures are without facial features or other features that determine racial disparities. If 'Silence' was created by a Syrian artist, would it generate a separate conversation from say a British artist doing the same? Yes, it would!

**Q5: The portrayal of disregard in 'Trickle Down Politics' (2012 – 2014) remains the core of this in-your-face sculptural work. Your statement notes the reasons for creating this body of work changed as new overlooked representations were experienced. Which occurrence today**

would you attribute this work too, that displays absolute disregard?

The destruction of our planet. A governor in the south of Nigeria destroyed tens of hectares of the most beautiful rubber plantation to make way for a conference center that was never built. The filth in Lagos. The pollution of gas flaring in the Niger-Delta region. Another disregard that bothers me is the disruption of lives of young girls from education. How do we not see the foolishness of our actions?

**Q6:** In relation to 'High Horses' (2016) and the widely held view that women are predestined to be wives and mothers, and nothing more, what experience stands out to you the most where your higher calling to be an artist was questioned and ridiculed because you are a woman?

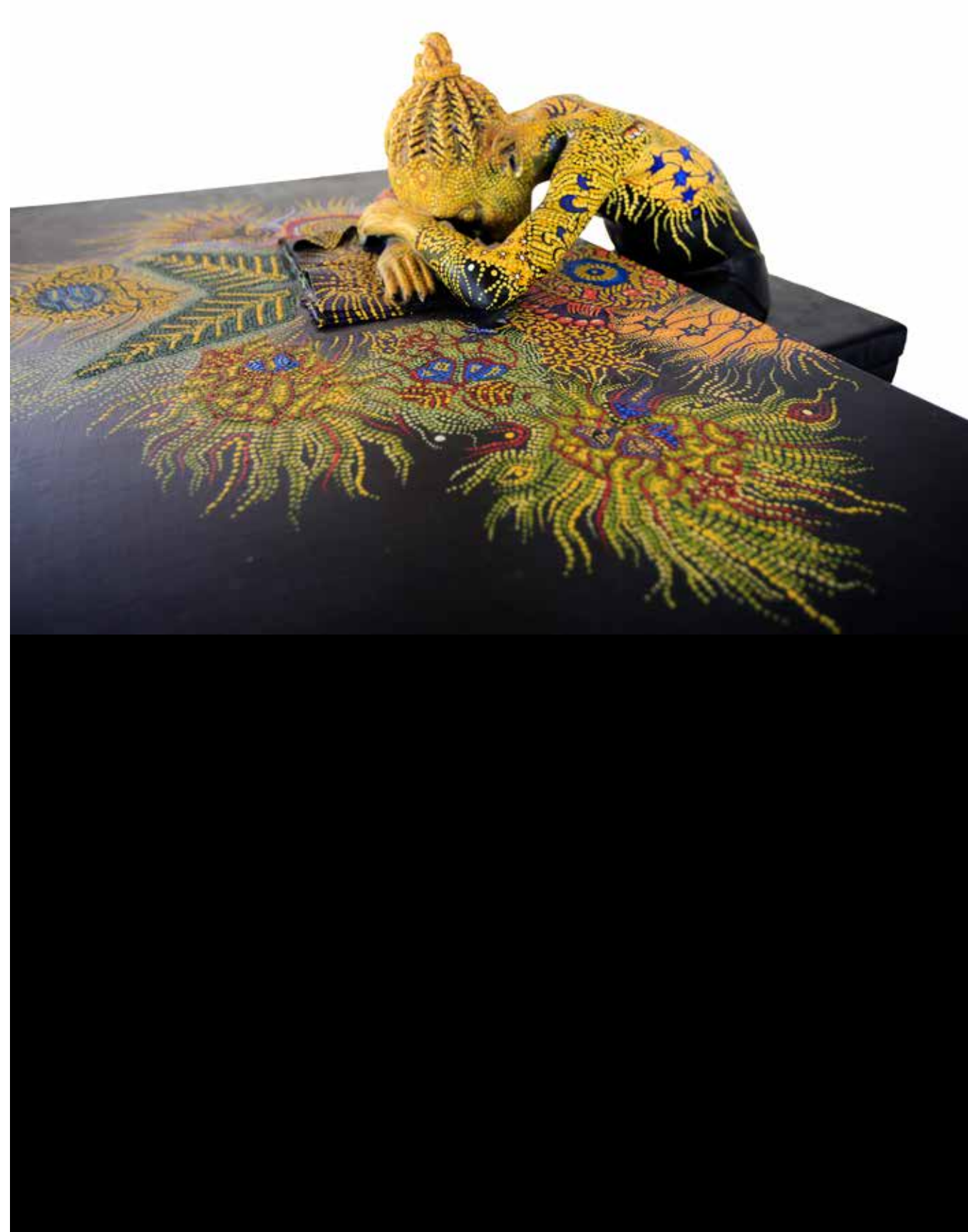
Nigeria is a place where being single is worse than cancer. People want to pray for you or exorcise the childless demon in you. It is unthinkable to be unmarried without children and worse still, to choose to be unmarried without children. Being an artist does not come without prejudice either. There are confrontations almost every day. I was physically assaulted by a stranger a couple of years back. He knew I was 'Peju Alatise the artist', he said so. He threatened to strip me naked and beat me up like he does with the woman he has. He repeated over and over again "I will show you I'm a man" and "I'm a rich man". This happened on a Lagos street and people watched recording the event on their phones. One man intervened and insisted I apologise to the man who was offended by my existence and practice. The hypocrisy that my voice is arrogant, opinionated and aggressive with 'poor deliverance' when I speak on certain issues but a male voice saying the same thing I say is sensitive, heroic and moral, is the most irritable experience. I must

add that many times, these questions about being female in my chosen field also irritate me. Being introduced as female even while present physically is idiotic. The need to have these gender disparity conversations in 2018, is crippling. It is not hypocrisy to create work about gender issues. It is hypocritical however, to approbate which gender can discuss it or how they choose to discuss it. Creating work about discrimination does not mean that I want to be subject to discrimination.

**Q7:** You introduce fantasy in your narrative when expressing concern for children in your work. In 'Sleep Deep', how do you unify the escapism and that which is disturbing?

Escapism is easy to do. There's no escapism without what you are escaping from. They work well together in narratives and even visually.

I remember reading my first Enid Blyton book which opened a different world of fantasy to me, different from the fantasy Yoruba folklores evoke. At that tender age, there is no clear distinction between reality and fantasy. Everything is believable. Now that I know better but still yearn for otherworldliness, Eduardo Galeano's writings fill in the gap. He seamlessly weaves magic, nightmares and reality in his books. I admire that in his work and I think that also gave me the permission to do the same in my work. 'Sleep Deep' is my wish for children to have that experience with great books! The reality is all the effort of great crusades to educate the girl child is threatened by kidnapping and sexual assault. School is quick becoming a dangerous place for a girl child. I do not think we are paying attention to this. What 'Flying Girls' and 'Sleep Deep' do is remind you who you were. It stirs empathy in adults. For children, I just want them to have a lovely experience like what Enid Blyton did for me.





**SLEEP DEEP**

2017

Wood, metal, stonecasts and acrylic paints

Table size: 48 x 96 in; Children: Life size; Overall: 120 x 60 in. (height: 52 in.)



SEE ME, SEE SOMEBODY  
2017/2018  
Acrylic on canvas  
36 x 36 in.



SEE ME, SEE SOMEBODY  
2017/2018  
Acrylic on canvas  
36 x 36 in.





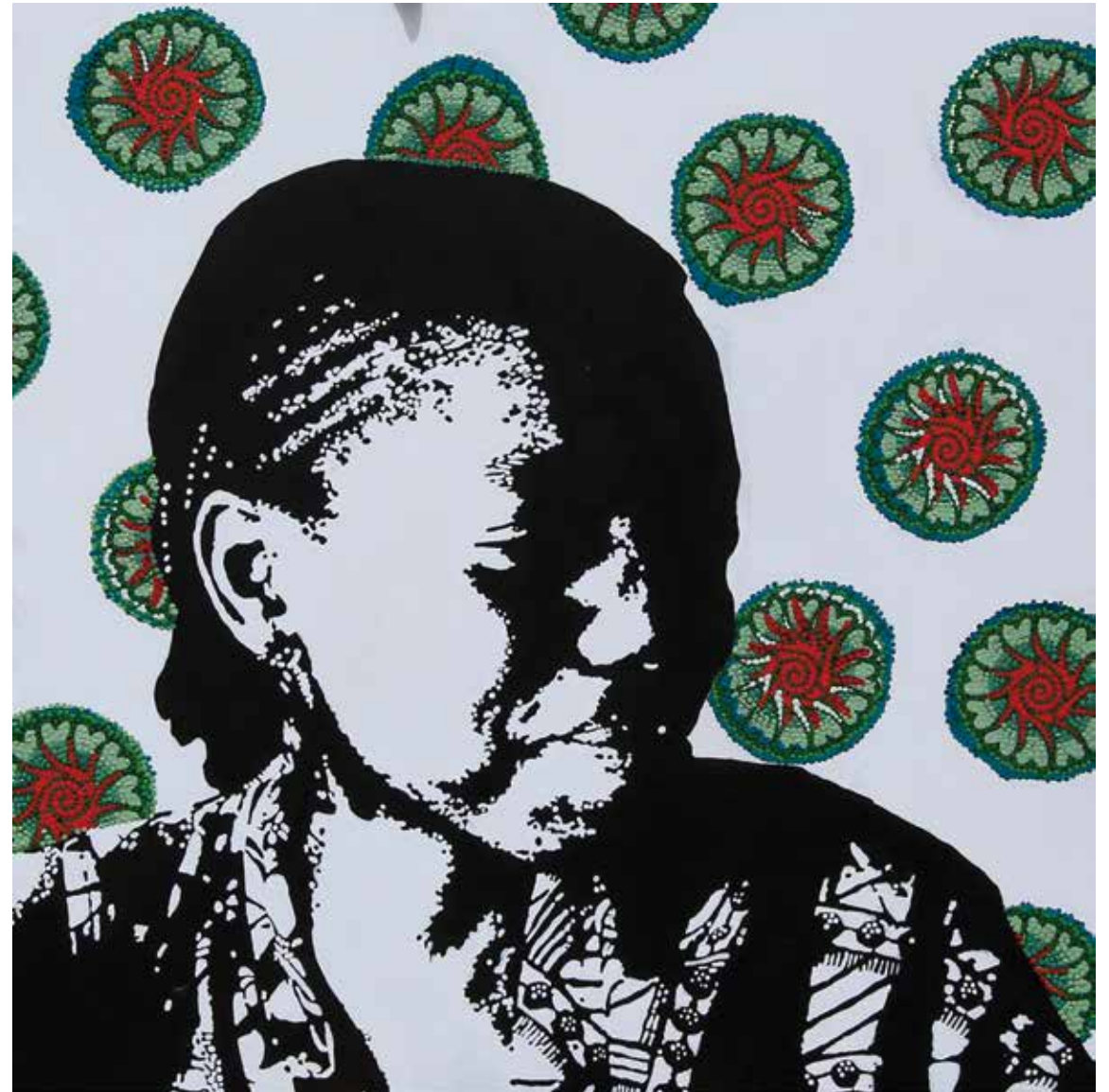
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Acrylic on canvas  
36 x 36 in.



SEE ME, SEE SOMEBODY  
2017/2018  
Acrylic on canvas  
36 x 36 in.



ROTTEN TO THE CORE, RED  
2015  
Burnt layers of canvas, acrylic paints on canvas  
60 x 60 in.



ROTTEN TO THE CORE, BLUE  
2015  
Burnt layers of canvas, acrylic paints on canvas  
60 x 60 in.

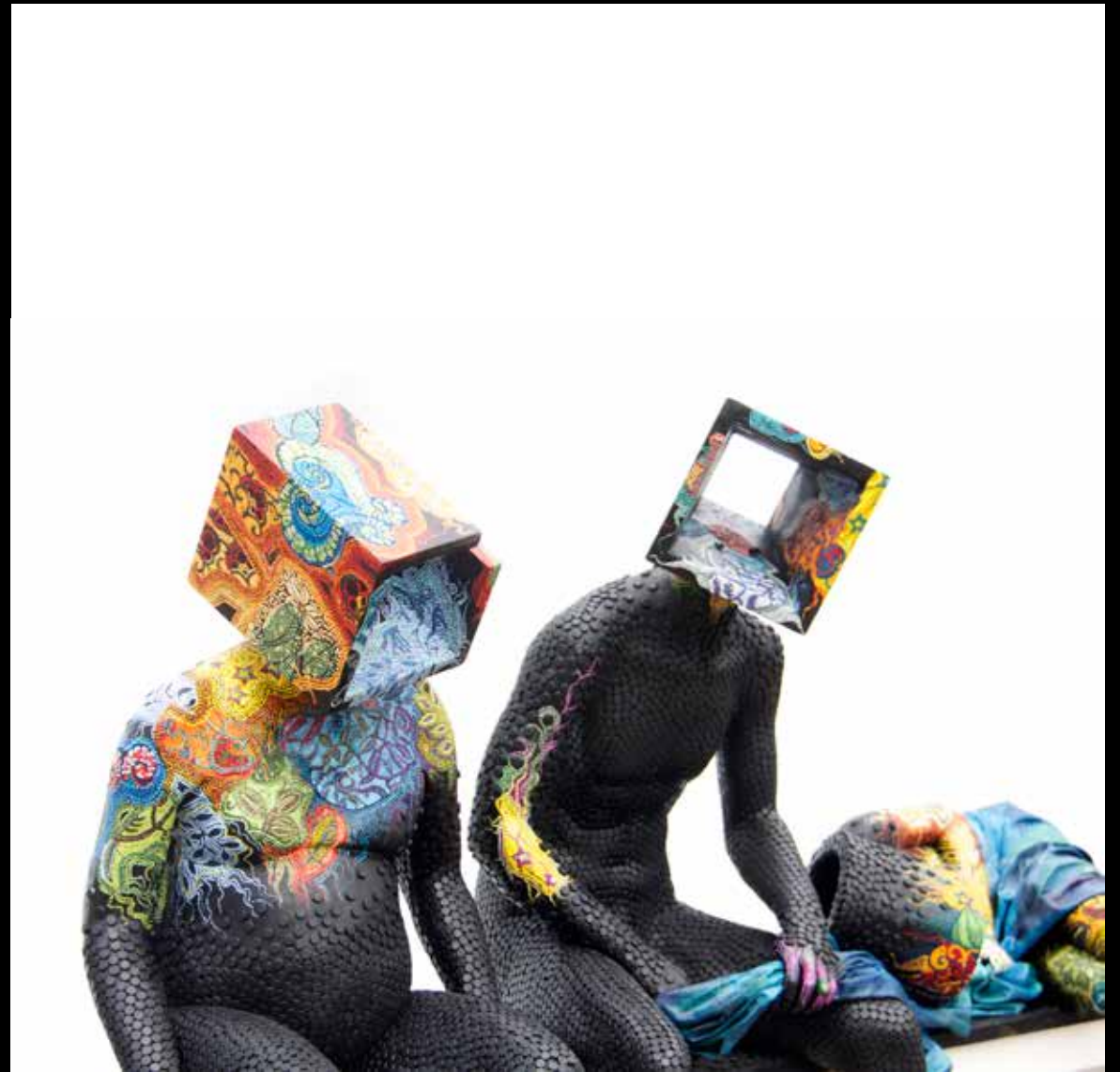


ROTTEN TO THE CORE, YELLOW

2015

Burnt layers of canvas, acrylic paints on canvas

60 x 60 in.





UNCONSCIOUS STRUGGLE

2012

Plaster-cast in resins, metal Panadol tablets, wood, textiles and acrylic paints Life size: 120 in. (length), 62 in. (height)



### TRICKLE DOWN POLITICS

(2012-2014)

Epoxy resins, Plaster of Paris, acrylic paints on canvas and plywood

In installed state: 180 in. (length), 36 in. (depth), 90 in. (height)

Wall components: 3 panels of 60 x 90 in. each; Floor components: 6 free-standing life-size pieces of 24 x 24 in. base size each

### ARTIST'S STATEMENT

*"If there is any artwork I have created that singularly provides an all-inclusive summary of my thoughts and observation on post-colonial Nigeria's socio-cultural and political satire conjured by corrupt Nigerian leaders with their attitude to its constitution, policies and people, it is the installation cleverly called 'Trickle Down Politics'."* These were my thoughts and intentions half way through completing this project. In my head was anger and ridicule for the government's attitude. But many things change, thoughts evolve and ideas morph into other ideas, as it is true what is said of time and its influence on change.

Eight years ago, I moved into a new building in a newly developed estate close to the Lagoon. The view from my back windows upstairs I thought was calming and peaceful, with a stream finding its way through a few trees and patches of grass to the lagoon. A six feet tall fence separated my yard from the scenery and I could only enjoy it from the back rooms upstairs. Everything was perfect until I sat by the open window for more than five minutes. The first man came, pulled down his trousers and defecated right there in full view from my window, with no care that we made eye contact. Then another joined. And then another joined. The morning breeze came with unbearable unpleasant smells that I thought I had to do something about it. From the window upstairs I yelled down at a man in the squatting position, "Oga, I beg, no shit there!"

"If I no shit here, na where I for shit?" he responded.

"Go shit for ya toilet na!"

"I dey shit here for many years before you come. If you no want see shit, close ya window!" he carried on his business.

To another I pled, "Oga, I beg no shit for there."

"Na for ya compound I dey shit? If you talk again I go throw this shit for your house." His threat worked and I closed my windows. This continued for several years and I resorted to photographing these people in my spare time and

used the images in an article I had written called 'Sons Of Adamu'. I knew there was still so much I had to resolve with this particular experience, the experience of total disregard for anyone else or of decency sake.

It is a popular joke in Nigeria (which is ironically true in reality) that if you want to deter people from urinating on your property you have to post a sign that says 'Please Urinate Here'. Civil disobedience is ingrained in the Nigerian culture but not in a way of protesting against objectionable laws and policies but of reckless abandonment of laws and policies in a way that it has become part of a way of life.

During the first tenure of governor Fashola of Lagos state, the governor declared urinating and defecating in public space illegal and punishable. Public toilets were built and subsequently locked up so they could remain clean. A very public figure, who had been sitting in a traffic jam on the carter bridge, got out of his car to relieve himself, slipped and then fell to his death. He was a hundred meters from a locked up toilet. Like everything else the governor's declaration was soon forgotten as even the assigned law enforcers relieved themselves on the highways too.

By mid-2012, my frustration for the public's general reckless disregard for all considerations and decency had peaked and this project was started. The occurrences of two years it took to complete the project greatly influenced the results. During these two years, Nigeria experienced 'the disregard of human life by boko haram terrorist group', 'the disregard of human rights of the girl child by the senators who included in the constitution that a girl had become of age once she is married', 'the disregard of pensioners' claims to retirement package by banking officials', 'the disregard of the well-being of The People by the Mr. President', the list goes on...With each experience of disregard, my reasons for creating this body of work changed. And as the 'why' changed the work title changed too. Its first title was 'Civil Disobedience', then 'Trickle Down Politics', and after the work was finished and new things happen, it means something different to me. But the core of it remains the same, a portrayal of disregard.

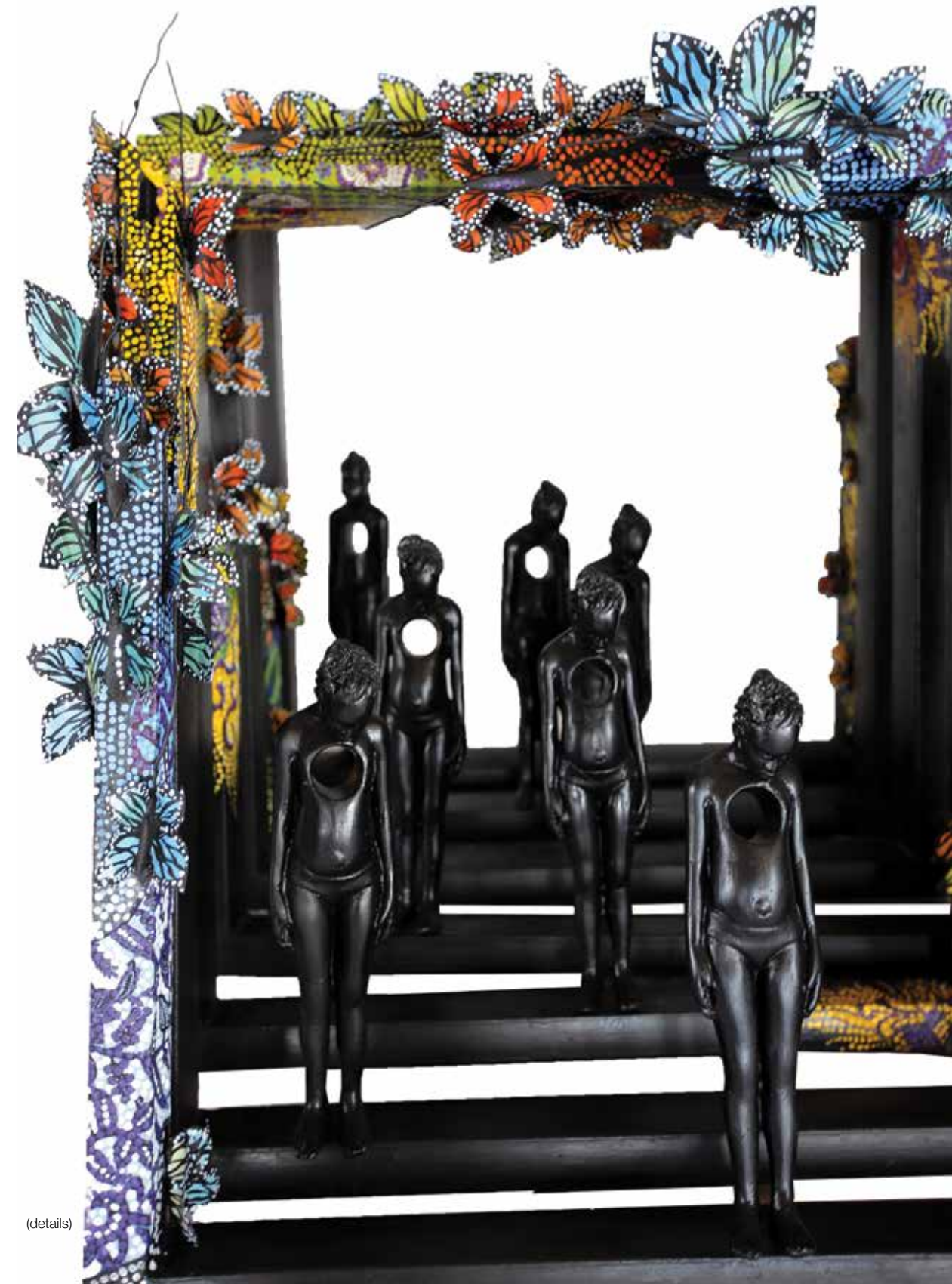


BUTTERFLY EFFECT

2017

Metal, resin cast and acrylic paints

36 x 36 in. per panel (20 panels grouped in 5)



(details)





SILENCE  
2017

Blown glass, water, stonecasts, textile, metal, wooden corks and acrylic paints  
Bottled size, 24 h x 10 in. diameter; metal stands vary in height



STICKS  
2017  
Metal, stonecasts and acrylic paints  
8 x 60 in. (per panel, 10 pairs)



GEODES  
2018  
Stonecasts, resins and metal stands  
20 in. diameter, varying in depth



### O IS THE NEW + (CRUCIFIX)

2016

Stonecasts and metal chains

40 in. (diameter), chain length varies in size

#### ARTIST'S STATEMENT

This particular work was inspired by the four young men, students from University of Port-Harcourt, tires hung around their necks and waist; they were burned and clobbered to death. They were innocent kids. They were murdered because someone in a crowd of people shouted "THEIF!"

The blood thirsty mob of unthinking fanatics, purposefully seized these boys because they were the only ones who seemed not to 'belong'.

Reminds me of the crucifix. The old fashion way of killing thieves. The crucifix is one of the holiest symbols. It was inspired by torture for inhumanity.

The new ways of killing now, is to make holes in bodies or put bodies in holes.

"When they are not putting them in holes, they put holes in them."

The love of violence seemingly conjured by moral-judgment. They wear the crucifix ever so proudly around their neck. "Here is a new symbol for you to admonish. The 'hole' symbol." There was no justice for the young men that died, 2012.



(details)

## PEJU ALATISE



This year, 2018 will mark 20 years of independent studio practise in Nigeria as a visual artist for Peju Alatise. She is an interdisciplinary artist, architect and author of two novels. Her debut novel *Orita Meta*, chronicling the interwoven path of three women, was nominated for the ANA/Flora Nwapa Prize for Women's Writing in 2006. She started her professional career as an architect working in an architectural firm alongside running a private art studio. Today, Peju is one of the leading contemporary artists on the African continent. Her works challenge the status quo of the African society and also of global affairs. She has been consistent with her experimentation with materials and techniques as a medium to analyse various socio-political issues. Peju has also been an influential voice on the Child Not Bride campaign in Nigeria, with her work regularly feeding into this discourse.

Peju Alatise is a fellow at the National Museum of African Art, part of the Smithsonian Institution and the 2017 winner of the FNB Art Prize in Johannesburg. Her work was exhibited at Venice Biennale's 57th edition, themed *Viva Arte Viva* (Long Live Art) in the Nigerian pavilion. Her work is currently being exhibited at the 2018 EVA Biennial in Ireland and 1:54 Art Fair in New York. Other recent past exhibitions of her works were held at the 2014 Casablanca Biennale in Morocco, Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art, Harvard University-2017, *Resignification of Black Body* 2016 in Museo Bardini, Florence.

Peju Alatise is the founder of the ANAI Foundation - a non-profit foundation dedicated to the development of visual arts in Nigeria, and the first purpose built artist's residency with a well-equipped ceramic studio, which offers sponsored training programs for ceramic artists.



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