



*Evocative
Colour*

Away From The Abstract

*Nelson
Okoh*

CHUCK 
GALLERY

FOREWORD

There has long been a debate, deeply felt and often strongly expressed over what constitutes 'African art'. Too often, contemporary African artists have had to decide whether to conform with or confront others' ideas and images of what this constitutes. On the one hand, especially in the white 'modern' and self-regarding West, the term has been underpinned by notions of traditional 'primitive' and 'tourist' art. This static and simplistic view has been a cultural straitjacket for some. Little wonder, then, that there has been a pushback by contemporary African artists. Many actively, sometimes playfully, distance themselves from this typecast, wanting their work to be seen for its intrinsic art value, drawing on their personal qualities and cultural richness, not simply being 'African Artists', but artists in their own rights.

Yinka Shonibare, in particular, has been instrumental in widening the debate; his use of Ankara and Batik Dutch Wax Print cloth as an expression of interplay and visual dialogue between Europe and Africa, his exploration of cultural identities as he addresses colonialism and post colonialism, has been a distinct 'bull's eye' dart in this conversation, a conversation that previously excluded most of the artists themselves.

This exploration of identity, the incorporation, reflection and fusing of heritage is often cited by artists of every

nationality as providing inspiration for their work. Certainly the work of African artists including Romauld Hazoumé, Shonibare, El Anatsui and Damola Adepoye play with musings of the continent's past – from the slave trade, colonialism, post colonialism and, now, a megacity Africa powerhouse. They are producing a body of work now 'auction house sought after', not only in Africa but worldwide, from London to New York. Since 2009, Bonhams has held more than ten contemporary African Art Auctions showcasing the works of artists including Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yinka Shonibare and El Anatsui. The last held in October 2016.

Away from the Abstract (Evocative Colour) is the fourth Chuck Gallery exhibition this year. It showcases the work of Nelson Okoh, a self-trained artist from Delta State, whose work is increasingly snapped up by astute Contemporary Art collectors in Nigeria. Okoh's forceful and explosive use of colour, his languidly liquid brush strokes, the story within a story that draws the observer into a world within, is compellingly evocative and hauntingly powerful.



As I step backwards, further from his abstract, his kaleidoscope of colour resolves into a redolent image begging further scrutiny. I wonder what it is that has caused my coral wearing lady's head to tilt to one side so reflectively, yet her arms - held behind her back - suggest a passivity that is denied by her stance, and I focus on what words might - or might not - have started from her pensive lips. I try to feel the dignified pain, so obvious but so contained, as my gold drop ear ringed lady casts her gentle, ethereal, almost sorrowful head downwards. What is it my gold hoop ear ringed lady is thinking? She is certainly lost in canyon deep thought. And I marvel at the strength of my three ladies in flame-tree red and gold, standing alone yet so proudly united in their sisterhood.

Nelson Okoh's paintings have a formidable physicality and movement. They are extraordinarily intimate in execution and scream out a passionate expression of soul.

In establishing Chuck Gallery, Chukwudi Onwudiwe demonstrates both artistic and business brilliance, seizing on this increasing global interest in the dynamic work of contemporary African artists. The

Manchester location – a two-hour train journey from London - is also a stroke of genius. Whilst there are several galleries exhibiting the work of African artists in London, including the two major auction houses, Chuck Gallery is the only one set up to cater to the North as well as the South.

And we have to offer up our thanks to Chukwudi Onwudiwe in curating and delivering this vital, vibrant and pertinent platform for the appreciation of dynamic and notable contemporary African art. A platform not only celebrating the powerful excellence of young and contemporary artists from West Africa but bringing what these exceptional artists have to say about contemporary social and political life to new and discerning audiences in the UK and beyond.

Elizabeth Oritsejolomi Dudley

Elizabeth Oritsejolomi Dudley is Nigerian-British and grew up in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, where her father was a professor of political science. Elizabeth now lives in London but retains close links with family in Nigeria. A lover of contemporary art, has a broad academic background, works in Parliament and has a keen interest in social justice and human rights here in the UK and also in Nigeria and Palestine specifically. She has been a passionate supporter of Chukwudi Onwudiwe and his promotion of contemporary artists since 2009, when she acquired her first – of several - ‘Chuck’ paintings.

Elizabeth is also a Trustee for the Britain-Nigeria Educational Trust, and was instrumental in introducing the Gallery to the Trust, which is using one of Chuck Gallery’s paintings by the artist Okey Ibeabuchi, Affection, as the image on their Christmas card for 2016.

Gallery Owners Statement

Season's Greetings!

As the dark days of winter close in around us in Manchester, it is a pleasure to invite you to join us in celebrating the work of Nelson Okoh, to give you this opportunity to immerse yourself in the vibrancy, colour and sheer joyfulness of this artist's work.

Welcome to Evocative Colour: Away from the Abstract, the fourth exciting exhibition from Chuck Gallery offering us so much to stimulate our senses and brighten our passage from the challenges of the old year into renewed energy and hope for us all in 2017.

It has been a tremendous first year, 2016, for us here at Chuck Gallery, as we launched the very first art space in the UK, in Manchester, solely dedicated to the promotion of modern African art and generating interest in African Contemporary art and culture. We are in a unique position, as a private gallery with our foundations firmly rooted in Sub-Saharan Africa, to bring to wider public attention in Europe, young discoveries like Joel Utuedor and Damola Adepoju as well as seasoned professionals including the likes of Fidel Oyiogu and now, to our delight, Nelson Okoh.

We are here in Manchester, as the city is truly Britain's new cultural capital. Building on its roots in the warehouses and factories of the Industrial Revolution and its renown as the capital of pop culture producing the iconic Oasis, today, Manchester dominates the culture headlines with a plethora of galleries, venues and festivals. It's home to some of the UK's most forward-thinking developers, one of the coolest music scenes

and a fast-expanding range of great hotels and restaurants, three Universities attracting students from across the globe and a Teaching Hospital that leads the world in a whole range of medicine and research.

The gallery is located on Plymouth Grove, a stone's throw from the Whitworth gallery, the Manchester Museum, Manchester Royal Infirmary, Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Manchester. It is with this backdrop that we have sought to engage and delight you in our extensive collection through various projects and programmes, art fairs, exhibitions, salons, seminars and workshops spanning the entire year.

We look forward to earnestly sharing with you, the buzz there is surrounding African art, and together, to celebrate the great contribution African Contemporary Art has made and continues to make to the cultural life of Manchester.

Happy reflection.

Chukwudi Onwudiwe



Curator's Note

Art exists because humans are emotional beings who make sense of existence only if their lives are rooted in memory and feeling. Without emotion, the sun sailing on purplish-green clouds towards a horizon in the distance, will mean nothing more than the complex result of some faraway phenomena.

Nelson Okoh, the artist in focus, is a self-taught painter whose works seek out not just our intellect but our emotions as well. The artist has mastered using knives to set feasts on canvas for the eyes. This mastery has come with the development of unique styles like the artist's Dripplle Impression, Spiral Impression and some other yet evolving styles, all of which combine to imbue Nelson's oeuvre with variety.

DRIPPLE IMPRESSION

The effect of rainwater dripping down a windshield or window glass is unmistakable in some of Nelson's paintings. Imagine the soothing effect of cool water on the skin on a day the sun blazes without relenting. On many occasions, this feeling is powerful enough to clear the mind, and temporarily wash away worry and despair. Introversion 2 reminds of that feeling of relief that comes when we are at peace with ourselves. Beyond evoking the calming effect of taking a bath in a shower or standing in the rain without care, the yellow-toned drizzle effect reminds us that sometimes, inspiration will come only when we block out distractions.

SPIRAL IMPRESSION

This second style is a more forceful and wild one that expresses movement, a phenomena that fascinates Nelson. Festive Mood features trumpeters from Northern Nigeria. This is a familiar subject that has been depicted a number of times by Nigerian artists. If we accept, however, that variety spices life, we can also appreciate the power of style to certify as refreshing, art inspired by a traditional subject. The energetic movement of Nelson's Spiral Impression riding on the strength of red and yellow hues, seems tamed by the artist's Dripplle Impression, as though the latter style tried to assert its influence on the painting process, in the artist's subconscious.

But the power of the drizzle effect completely loses hold over Spiral Impressions in Durbar Festival. A Durbar festival is a magnificent sight to behold. The Emir and palace officials, dressed in flowing robes bespectacled with gems, ride majestically through the streets of the emirate, on beautifully robed horses, the jubilant crowd singing praises and dancing to the beat of the drums and the blare of long trumpets. The effect of reds colliding into spiralling yellows, and vice versa, is a faithful expression of the vibrancy of Durbar festivals.

Reflection of Wares is an orange-hued painting that taps vigorously into the energy of the spiral effect. The day's sales have ended. The weak sun in the distance testifies to this. Now is the time to reflect on gains and losses. Nelson's key achievement in this work is the seamless merger of past and present in one scene.

The spiralling red and yellow hues remind us of the beehive of activity that might have occurred hours ago. Yet this is a picture that has only three figures. All in all, we end up feeling the silence of reflection and the energy of trade.

BEAUTY AND DEVOTION

When all is reduced to fundamentals, two concepts of Woman—motherhood and physical beauty—never go away. “Mother and Child” a theme running through hundreds of paintings by artists of different generations and nationalities, remains the perfect visual ode to the kind of devotion that characterises motherhood.

Aspiration is a striking abstract painting by Nelson that powerfully communicates this almost divine relationship between a mother and her child. The painting is partly obscured by virtue of its rendition in Nelson’s Spiral Impression style. We can make out the figure of the mother quite easily but that of the child is nebulous, its gender difficult to determine. A child’s impressionable mind might be the suggestion here. This child’s head is bowed and its mother’s right hand rests on its head as though blessing or rebuking it. Any child can appreciate that devotion is a two-way street: one of unmerited kindness and the other, correction by the sting of a tongue or cane. But in all, as the woman sucking her finger amply suggests, motherhood is a gift most women aspire to; one that brings immense joy.

Mothers are an interesting subject for Nelson Okoh.

He appreciates all mothers, and this is one reason he is fascinated by the female form. The woman in Preparation is regal and comes across as a wise, sophisticated lady who will not let age steal away her beauty and power. Perhaps this is Nelson’s grandmother, a woman who Nelson speaks so fondly of. A woman who, in little, gave abundantly to the grandson she fostered. Perhaps Nelson sought to combine the persona of his biological mother, and the grandmother who fate decided will be the woman to care for him. This painting, too, is a powerful visual statement of identity, which forces us to ask: what is this woman preparing for? Maybe she prepares to wear a crown stamped with professional awards. Maybe she prepares to be locked as one with either the man of her dreams or the vague idea of a breadwinner who her family has so diligently selected for her. Maybe she prepares to tend to the destiny of a little child who will someday find fame by the work of his hands.

Red lipstick, false eyelashes and cute earrings more than tell that the lady in Passion for Yellow is a sophisticated woman. We know this despite the haze of a spaghetti-like web of paint the woman’s form is intertwined with. It is common belief that women multi-task better than men. Today, the place of women as mothers in society is a complex one that straddles the terrains of childbearing, child rearing, home-keeping, professional career and the celebration of self (think selfies on social media). We can judge the contribution of this complex stylistic treatment to this painting as a celebration of the multifaceted modern day woman, as well as a



judgement on the rich impressions women have had on the life of Nelson the artist.

DARKNESS TO LIGHT

Nelson says his painting process progresses from dark to light. We can relate universal themes like the triumph of good over evil, perseverance in the face of adversity, and the courage to explore, to this process. Particular incidences in Nelson's journey as an artist provide compelling suggestions that this painting process might not be unrelated to his subconscious musings.

Many years ago, Nelson gravitated to the very depths of financial problems. He was a young man living with a wife and kid in Ajegunle, a popular ghetto in Lagos state. Money was out on a long vacation and buying drinking water had become a luxury. Desperate to extricate his family from the nadir of hunger, he resorted to painting; using what little materials he had around. Each day passed with him clinging to the hope that his unfolding creation will miraculously bring him to a place of abundance. When his painting knives had fully served to spread paint on canvas, Nelson took a step more courageous than hoping for inspiration on an empty stomach. He set out on foot from his abode in Ajegunle, with two heavy paintings clutched at his hand, and began the long walk to Apapa in search of a miracle.

Nelson's painting Silhouette could really be about

giving up at the brink of success. Sometimes, the remedy for our ailing hearts lies just under the cliff, ready to spring up and usher in the dawn of better days. Hope that lingers is all that is required. But the weary soul, exhausted from all travails, gives up at this point, turns back and vanishes into the darkness, not aware that the light so hungered for, has now streamed into the tunnel.

On getting to Apapa, after covering more than a kilometre on foot, Nelson walked some more, wandering around and wondering how to precisely locate his miracle. Eventually, his feet stepped into a gallery, their covering screaming tales of financial woes to the receptionist. He couldn't be deterred by the haughty looks cast on him. Fortunately, the curator strolled by, assessed Nelson's work on the spot and asked how much he was willing to sell. The desperate artist's instant mental decision was to quote a sum equal to transport-back-home plus keep-family-going-for-a-few-days. But his inner voice reminded him of the time, effort and ingenuity he had put into these paintings. Emboldened by this voice, he asked for twelve times the figure he had in mind. The curator offered half this figure. That was how Nelson found his miracle, his first major break as an artist.

This is the sort of experience Nelson conveys in *Beauty in Disguise*. Miracles do happen and painful circumstances can end up in bliss. Stepping away from this painting grants our minds a greater faculty to conjure up images embedded in this very abstract work. A nebulous shape of love on the centre-left of the painting also communicates an image of two individuals conjoined in love. As this couple springs



ever so anxiously towards a freedom they cannot tell from whence will come, the dark cloud of anxiety hangs over them, sustaining a sense of foreboding by the added power of unpleasant smudges of troubles hovering around. Nevertheless, if we look intensely at the right, our eyes capture the miracle. Call it the love of God, the kindness of fate or the reward for persistence—whatever—but yes, if we look intensely, we make out the profile of a more defined shape of love suspended as a portal to the light above. Freedom has come at last! What joy to see that the determination to make it through whatever difficulties, the hope of a better tomorrow and the persistent pursuit of vision that held this couple together through dark times; finally leads to the place of light!

ART FOR PEACE

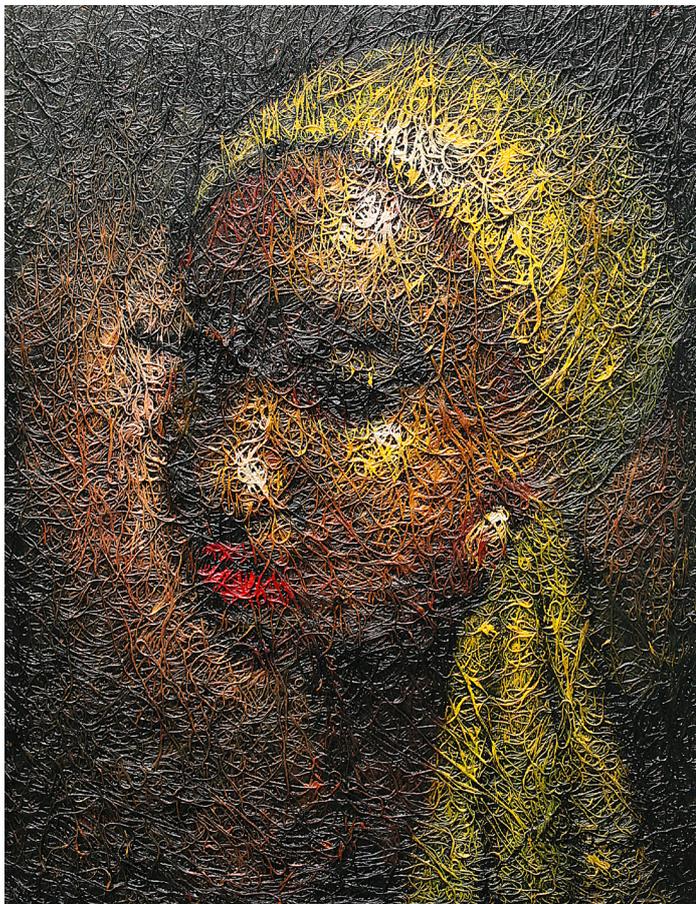
Nelson is a man of peace. He dreams of a world where weapons will no longer be manufactured. But this dream doesn't just exist in his head as wishful thinking. Peace must be portrayed on canvas and the minds of the youths must be reoriented towards peace. Even as we await more topical paintings from Nelson on the subject of peace, we must observe that the lovely paintings on display in this exhibition, have sprung from a mind that is at peace with itself.

Samuel Okopi





Preparation
22 x 36 inches
Oil on Canvas



Passion for Yellow
24 x 36 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas

Silhouette
36 x 58 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas





Reflection of Wares
34 x 45 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas

Signs of Hope
36 x 45 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas





Little Haven
36 x 46 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas

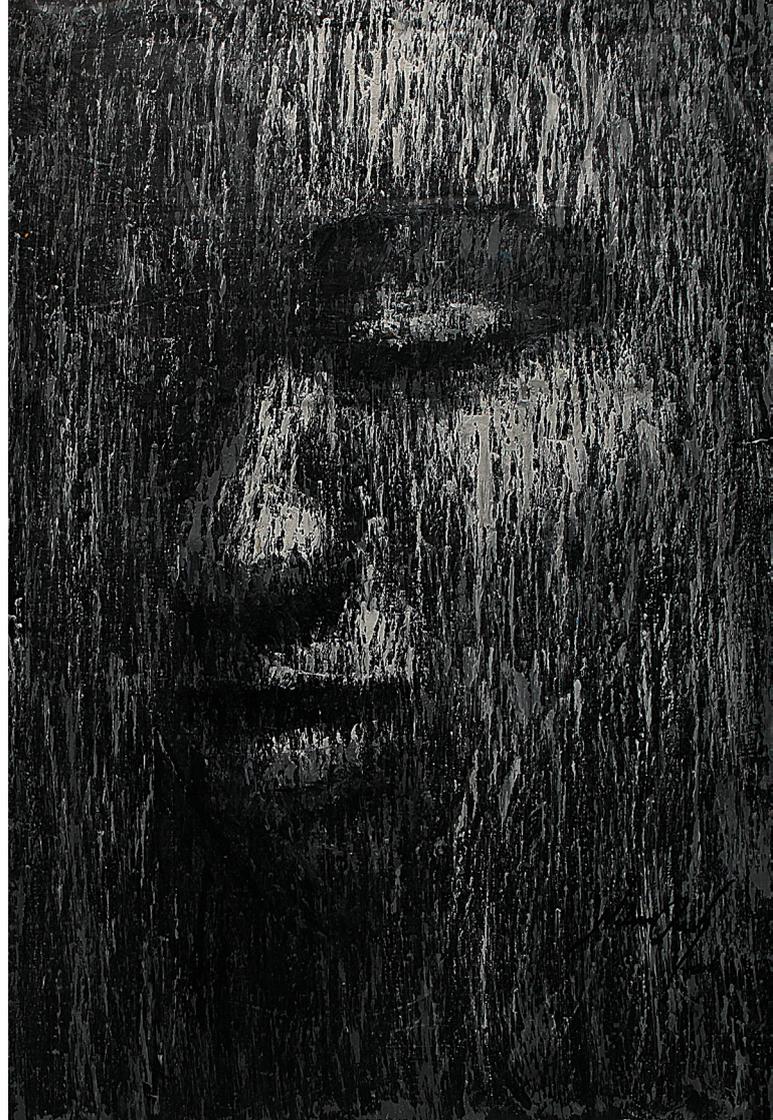
Inner Modesty
36 x 46 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas





Durbar Festival
46Durbar x 46 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas

Introversion
24 x 36 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas





Murky Distortion
46 x 46 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas



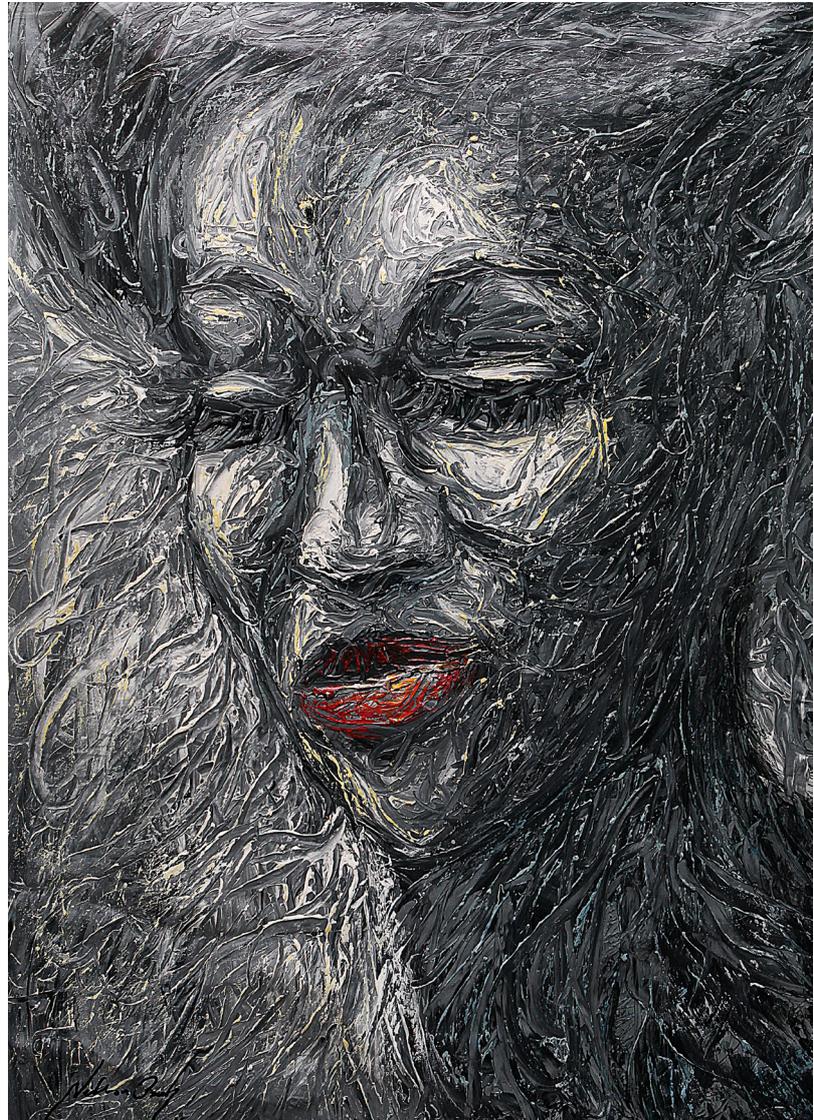
Aspiration
22 x 36 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas

Kindred
36 x 68 inches
Oil on Canvas



EVOCATIVE COLOUR | *Away From the Abstract*

Tenet View
36 x 46 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas

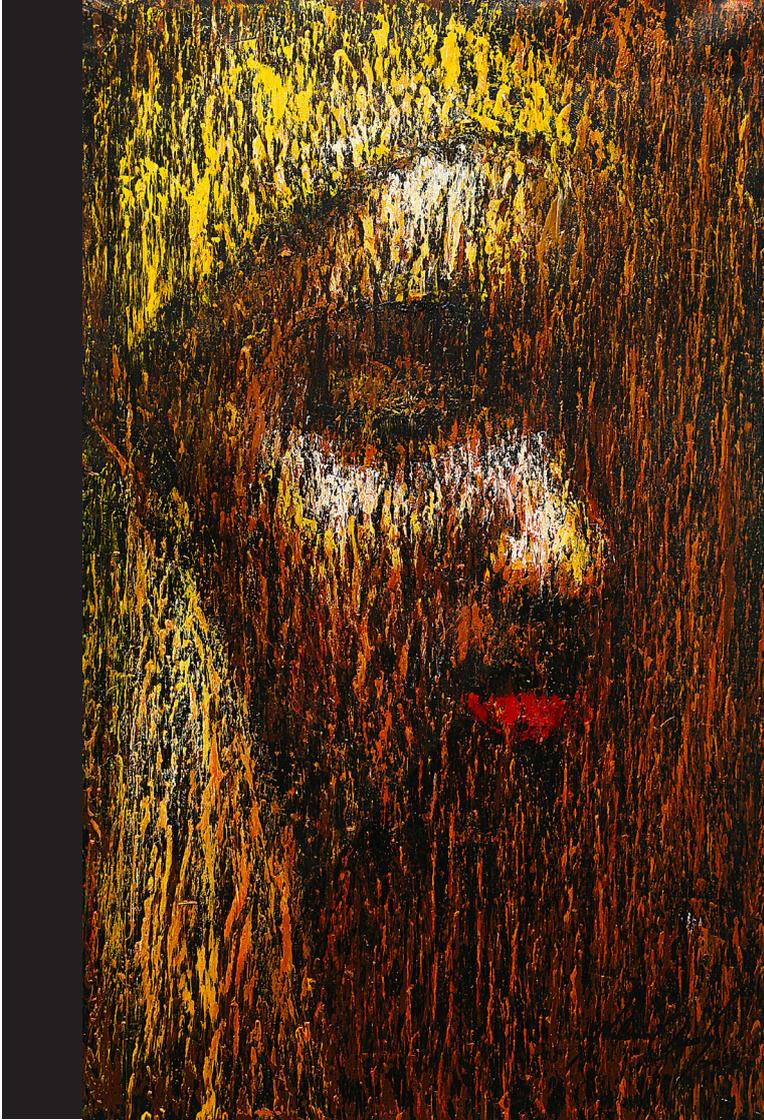


Peaceful signs
36 x 47 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas



Festive Mood
32 x 47 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas





Introversion 2
24 x 36 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas



Poetic Expression
36 x 45 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas

Beauty in Disguise
36 x 46 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas





Unilateralism
36 x 46 inches
Mixed Media on Canvas

Artist's Profile

Name: Nelson A. Okoh

Place of Birth: Lagos, Nigeria.

Date of Birth: 14th of April, 1974

State of Origin: Delta State.

Marital Status: Married with Five Children

Selected Exhibitions:

2008 Nigerian Cultural Landscape in Perspective

2009 Nigerian Cultural Landscape in Perspective

2010 Nigerian Cultural Landscape in Perspective

AUCTIONS

2012 Terra Kulture Art Auction

2013 Terra Kulture Art Auction



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