

# Nengi Omuku

SELECTED PRESS

ARTSY

## New Artist Spotlight: Nengi Omuku at Kasmin

ARTSY EDITORIAL

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Portrait of Nengi Omuku by Stephen Tayo, 2023. Courtesy of Kasmin.



Nengi Omuku, *Kwadwo I*, 2022. Photo by Mark Blower. Courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami.

Idyllic and unnerving; still, yet pulsating with movement; intimate, yet impersonal. These are the tensions that shroud Nigerian-born and -based Nengi Omuku's abstract figurative paintings of people lounging in domestic spaces. The artist, who is currently represented by Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery and London-based Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, has also recently joined the roster of New York-based Kasmin, which will debut her solo show in September of 2024. Omuku's work will be featured in "Aso oke: Prestige Cloth from Nigeria" at the Saint Louis Art Museum in Missouri this September.

Relying on either a physical sitter or archival photography, Omuku's paintings erase the specificities of her subjects, while retaining the expressions or clothes that capture their essence. Painted onto *sanyan*, the Nigerian textile for draped clothing, Omuku's works omit markers of specific identity (like faces), to broaden the idea of what an identity-based work looks like.



Nengi Omuku, *Reclining Figures*, 2022. Courtesy of The Baltimore Museum of Art.

"[Omuku] has developed a visual language that expands on the vocabulary of both contemporary painting and historical Nigerian textile traditions, resulting in work that is completely captivating and transportive," Nick Olney, the president of Kasmin, told Artsy. By locating her subjects in domestic settings, Omuku invites a reconsideration of the borders between public and private, an invisible line that often shapes how work by artists of color is perceived.

Omuku's artistic practice is influenced by her time at the Slade School of Fine Art at University College, London, where she received both her BA and MA. At Slade, Omuku studied the traditional use of oil painting for both landscapes and portraiture that were popularized during the British Romantic period.



Nengi Omuku, *The Lighthouse*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.

Romanticism bleeds into the composition of Omuku's paintings, with their characteristic depictions of people experiencing fervent emotions or the mysticism of nature. This can be seen in the painting *Kwadwo I* (2022), where a despondent individual faces the city from a balcony with his back to us, evoking the composition of Caspar David Friedrich's 1818 painting *The Wanderer Above the Sea Fog*.

Omuku's work creates a tension between a classical British style of painting on an "unconventional" material to reference the history of British imperialism in Nigeria. Rather than narrating specific historical tales of that period, her work tracks its influence by portraying how people of color navigate hostile environments.

Olny further added, "She's very clearly a rising star and we're thrilled to expand the recognition of her work both in the United States and beyond. It's a privilege to be welcoming her to Kasmin's growing roster of artists."

## Nigerian Artist Nengi Omuku

ALAYO AKINKUGBE

MARCH 23, 2023



Above Nengi Omuku, *Reclining Figures*, 2022, oil on sanyan, 193 x 249 cm, 76 x 98 1/8 in, Collection Baltimore Museum of Art, MN, Image courtesy Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, Photo: Mark Blower, Nengi Omuku.

Since February 2020, art historian and writer Alayo Akinkugbe has been championing emerging and forgotten Black artists, sitters, curators and thinkers as the founder of the Instagram account @ABlackHistoryOfArt. Today, she shines a light on the work of Nengi Omuku.

Akinkugbe says: "I met Nengi at her studio in Lagos in 2020, we had just been through months of lockdown and I remember being so moved to encounter her paintings as the first works of art after being at home for so long.

"We connected via Instagram, after we'd been featured on the same episode of Katy Hessel's *The Great Women Artists* podcast, and realised we were both in Lagos."

Inspired by archival and current images taken from the Nigerian press and media, Omuku creates ethereal scenes of figures in constant flux, interacting with one another and the landscape around them. She also works in oil paint on strips of Sanyan – a Western Nigerian fabric created from woven threads of wild moth silk and blended with industrial cotton.

Akinkugbe says: “I love Nengi’s work for its otherworldly aesthetic quality, but also for the fact that it is physically intertwined with Nigerian cultural history: Nengi paints on vintage Sanyan, a traditional Yoruba fabric, which is still worn today. With her work, she transcends the two-dimensional nature of painting, often hanging paintings away from the wall, turning them into installations and allowing the viewer to appreciate all angles of the work – both her painting and the fabric itself on the reverse of it.”

Omuku says: “My work is influenced by the experience of living in Lagos, Nigeria. With some of the pieces coming from contemporary and archival press photographs and others being purely imagined portals for escape.”

In addition to showing her work across the world in solo shows in Lagos, London, Berlin and New York, Nengi Omuku has also been commissioned by the Arts Council England to paint a mural in an intensive care psychiatric ward at the Maudsley Hospital, London. Providing people in challenging circumstances with access to contemporary art as a form of therapy is something Omuku feels strongly about and inspired her to create The Art of Healing, a charitable organisation in Nigeria. TAOH also works with leading contemporary artists to transform hospital rooms to help improve the living conditions of patients.

Until April 29, Omuku’s work can be currently seen at Gagolian, London as part of Rites of Passage, an exhibition of 19th contemporary artists who share a history of migration, curated by Pájú Oshin.

## Rites of Passage review: stilt-walkers and slave ship ghosts brave the Atlantic

*From gentle reflections to horrific reminders of the middle passage, compelling stories of migration cut through this sprawling show of work by 19 black artists*

ADRIAN SEARLE

MARCH 21, 2023



A world remembered ... *Eden* by Nengi Omuku. Photograph: Prudence Cuming Associates

[EXTRACT]

Nengi Omuku paints scenes on woven-together strips of a traditional Nigerian fabric. Striped cloth, drying on a line and laid out on a beach, also appears in one painting. In another, fishermen haul a net. Other figures appear and disappear, floating and dissolving. There is a real feeling of a world remembered, of drifting and daydreaming and losing oneself.

# West Africa's art scene: uncovering a long legacy of creativity

*Restitution offers an opportunity for a new engagement by former colonial powers with the region's rich cultural history*

AINDREA EMELIFE

MARCH 11, 2023



'Kwadwo I' (2022) by Nengi Omuku © Courtesy the artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London

[EXTRACT]

El Anatsui's Turbine Hall Commission at Tate Modern later this year underlines the impact the Ghanaian artist has made on subsequent generations. Known for his bottle-top installations, his practice goes far beyond that. For Nigeria, we are experiencing a vibrancy in the contemporary domestic scene and in the diaspora — the likes of Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, Nengi Omuku, Victor Ehikhamenor — many of whom feature in Gagosian London's upcoming show Rites of Passage.

# West Africa's art scene: uncovering a long legacy of creativity

*Restitution offers an opportunity for a new engagement by former colonial powers with the region's rich cultural history*

ANDREA EMELIFE

MARCH 11, 2023

16

FT Weekend

11 March/12 March 2023

## Arts

If you visit Igan Street in Benin City, in Edo State, you will come across a street of bronze casters. This guild has passed down the art from father to son for more than a thousand years — the same street where the famous Benin Bronzes were cast is still in operation.

Nigerian arts and culture are thriving. Despite a global economic downturn, an unstable currency, inflation and political turbulence, creative expression flourishes through the power and sophistication of our ancient kingdoms, and our post-independence freedoms.

West Africa has recently come into focus as the Benin Bronzes take centre stage in the restitution discussion. But the truth is: restitution is meaningless if it doesn't catalyse and connect with the present and the future. The return of objects does not reach its maximum impact if we, as globalised art world, do not link this moment with the vibrancy of Africa's contemporary art scene and come together to support its overdue rise and those working within it.

Restitution addresses the injustices of history and is symbolic as it reintroduces missing pieces into our artistic canon. But it is not static. The enthusiasm to return and the self-congratulation that accompanies it should metamorphose into a new connection with the countries from where the works originate. The return of objects such as the Benin Bronzes is not the ending of a relationship; it should be the beginning.

Much of the west African art scene's success is owed to collectivity and community. Residency programmes founded by some of today's most successful contemporary artists — such as Kehinde Wiley's Black Rock Senegal, Yinka Shonibare's GAS Foundation, Amoko Bodo's dot ateliers and the Nolder Residency — encourage home-grown talent and collaborate with exciting galleries on the ground, such as Accra's ADA and Gallery 1957, Rele, Ko and Tiwani in Lagos, and Itiran projects between Lagos and London by Dada Gallery and SABO.

El Anatsui's Turbine Hall Commission at Tate Modern later this year underlines the impact the Ghanaian artist has made on subsequent generations. Known for his bottle-top installations, his practice goes far beyond that. For Nigeria, we are experiencing a vibrancy in the contemporary domestic scene and in the diaspora — the likes of Funmi Adeniyi-Jones, Nengi Omuku, Victor



## 'A long legacy of creativity'

West Africa | The region's art, from Benin bronzes to the present day, is a continuous story with global importance, writes curator *Andrea Emelife*

Ehikhamenor — many of whom feature in Gagosian London's upcoming show *Rites of Passage*.

In the 20th century, the political realist works of Aina Onabolu and Akinola Lasikan, the cultural revivalism art of Ben Enwonwu, and the anti-colonial, antimaterialist art of Uche Okeke and the Zaria Society were all defined by avant-garde ideologies. As I write in the wake of Nigeria's elections, I think of Demas Nwoko's "Nigeria, 1959" (1960).

Top, from left: 'Kwawo' (2022) by Nengi Omuku; 'Nigeria, 1959' (1960) by Demas Nwoko; Rukayat, Lagos (2019) by Stephen Tayo

Right: 'Head with Horns (Oja Suite)' (1962) by Uche Okeke — Courtesy Nengi Omuku and Papa Huseinbun Gallery, London; courtesy of SAGE

Nwoko sought inspiration from European Symbolists and Post-Impressionists such as Henri Rousseau and Paul Gauguin and, with Uche Okeke's call for a "natural synthesis" of tradition and western culture, merged the two. In the political disquiet a year before independence from colonial rule, the white officers are long, drawn-out symbols of disillusionment — tired and almost ghostly white — set against the characters behind, where shadow cloaks black faces. The brushwork is elegant and considered, and there is something quite biblical in the composition — an ominous foreboding. This tipping-point image is part of a broader art history of post-colonialism, the discourse of which still ripples through contemporary art.

The possibilities of west African art are exciting, but it cannot be an island. How can the western art world engage and support institutions in west Africa and across the continent, and connect these thriving hubs with their own so that this creative moment is sustained in the pursuit of a truly global art ecosystem, one could envision a true equitable circulation of cultures. If globalisation can bring Africa to the world and the world to Africa, how does this circulation produce returns? Optimism is at the heart of Africa: sensibility. The late curator Okwui Enwezor said, "The future belongs to Africa because it seems to have happened everywhere else." In many ways

The Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) — where I have recently been appointed curator, modern and contemporary — is emblematic of such a bright future. Due to open in stages from 2024, it will be a world-class arts, culture and heritage complex that will celebrate, research and conserve west African and diaspora art from antiquity up to the modern day, as well as heritage and history. Its ambitions and scope extend much further than a repository for Benin Bronzes.

What does a museum for west Africa need to do? How does this differ from its western counterparts? Economic uncertainty means that a relevant African-

based museum must do much more. The creative sector is one of the fastest growing, and African cultural institutions such as EMOWAA should provide an ecosystem to nourish skills, exchange and opportunities for creatives and cultural heritage specialists. There is an urgent need for creative hubs with research labs, galleries, education and performance spaces, all of which are embedded in EMOWAA's plans.

Until the mid-1990s art history didn't have a field that focused on modern and contemporary African art. We found our own scholars to fill these gaps — historians and curators such as the late Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, whose impactful academic careers insist on the importance of the work that African artists, living in and outside of the continent, have made and continue to make. One of my principal goals at EMOWAA is to build on these efforts to tell our stories and extend the intricate connections that already exist.

My first remit: Nigerian Modernism. The civil rights movement of the 1960s, when the sociopolitical circumstances in the US highlighted racial injustice, catalysed unprecedented creativity. Artists such as Faith Ringgold, Jacob Lawrence and Betye Saar in the US were making work about their predicament at the same time as Nigeria's Modernists such as Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko were wrangling with a two-fold optimism and criticality in a post-independence Nigeria. Art had to play a role in the transformation of society — in majority-

'The future belongs to Africa because it seems to have happened everywhere else' — Okwui Enwezor

black nations, issues of identity and representation take on new meaning. Following the rallying events of the Black Lives Matter movement, we are presented with an opportunity to foster curiosity, research and support for a vibrant new art scene which is, in fact, just the uncovering of a long legacy of creativity. As we reconfigure how to tell a more expansive story of what it means to be human, we must look to Africa.

To do this authentically, we must engage, support and collaborate. Long-term investment — by way of financial support, institutional partnerships and collaborative initiatives that prioritise culture as a nation-maker — must ensure that the art scene we have fought so hard to build for ourselves is connected to a global story. Supporting the future — museums, artists and curators of the future — is at the core of what is exciting in west Africa. The role of the artist is to bring their view of the world to us, to challenge what we thought we knew or to remove the limiting blinkers of history to see ourselves in new ways.



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## Art review: *Rites of Passage* at Gagosian, Britannia Street, London

JONATHAN EVENS

APRIL 14, 2023



Nengi Omuku, *Eden* (2022), oil on sanyan

### [EXTRACT]

Using oil paint on sanyan — a traditional Nigerian fabric — Nengi Omuku's work interrogates ambiguity and liminality with a focus on interior psychological spaces. In *Eden*, she alludes to the biblical paradise, composing using a vibrant, Fauvist palette and invoking a longing for pre-lapsarian tranquillity and oneness with nature. Having trained as a florist and horticulturist, she is seeking reconnection with the natural world and the solace to be found there. This image also takes us on an allegorical journey from darkness into light, with our eye following the passage of figures across the utopian landscape.

# Nengi Omuku presents “Parables of Joy” at Pippy Houldsworth Gallery in London

LA RÉDACTION

JULY 16 2022



The importance of irises ... Early New York Evening (1954) by Jane Freilicher. Photograph: Courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Estate of Jane Freilicher, and Kasmin Gallery

Pippy Houldsworth Gallery presents “Parables of Joy,” a first independent exhibition by Nigerian-born artist Nengi Omuku open through July 30, 2022.

Using oil paint on sanyan, artist Nengi Omuku’s work questions vagueness and liminality by focusing on inner mental spaces and how they manifest in the real world: different bodies depict an actual delivery of the complex psyche.

Creating ethereal situations of constantly changing otherworldly figures, their appearances are intentionally obscured, becoming silent featureless spectators whose gaze actually seems to penetrate the viewer.



Through “Parables of Joy”, Nengi Omuku opposes singularity and instead embraces global insight, repeating the melody of Greek theater. In her investigation of the complexities of her social heritage, race, and personality, Nengi Omuku frequently relies on current and recorded images from the Nigerian press and media.

Groomed as a flower seller and horticulturist by her mother, Nengi Omuku is driven by organic science. Due to the last two years of irregular interruptions during the global pandemic, these works attempt to reconnect with the regular world. Approaching the non-literal and conceptual, Nengi Omuku presents spaces in which the differentiation between bodies and nature is often obscured, considering the complexities of exploring a place and existing in a place.



This reflection is also explored through her use of materials – Nengi Omuku sews together pieces of sanyan, frequently consolidating them with comparative examples before beginning to apply layers of oil paint to the reverse.

The polarity of the unpredictably woven and carefully planned materials, coupled with the softness of the oil paint, brings out the life between societies while feeling deeply associated with her home nation.

## Nengi Omuku at Pippy Houldsworth, London, United Kingdom

*Pippy Houldsworth Gallery presents 'Parables of Joy', the first solo exhibition of works by Nigerian-born Nengi Omuku at the gallery.*

17 JUNE, 2022



Nengi Omuku, *Reclining Figures*, 2022. Oil on sanyan, 80 x 110cm. Courtesy the artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London.  
© Nengi Omuku 2022

Using oil paint on sanyan – a traditional Nigerian fabric used for draped clothing – Omuku's work interrogates ambiguity and liminality with a focus on interior psychological spaces and how these manifest within the physical world: multiple bodies depict a physical rendering of the multifaceted subconscious. Creating ethereal scenes of spectral figures in constant flux, their faces are deliberately blurred, becoming featureless silent observers whose gaze still seemingly penetrates out towards the viewer. Resisting singularity they instead embrace the collective experience, echoing the

chorus in Greek theatre. In exploration of the complexities surrounding her cultural heritage, race and personal identity, Omuku often also draws on current and archival images taken from the Nigerian press and media.

Having trained as a florist and horticulturist under her mother, Omuku takes inspiration from the botanical. In reaction to the past two years of intermittent lockdowns during the global pandemic, these works seek a reconnection with the natural world. Sitting between the figurative and the abstract, Omuku presents spaces in which the distinction between bodies and nature is often blurred, reflecting on the intricacies around navigating place and belonging. This is also explored through her use of materials – Omuku stitches together strips of sanyan, often combining those with similar patterns before starting to apply layers oil paint to the reverse. The dichotomy between the intricately woven and carefully designed materials, combined with the fluidity of the oil paint, speaks to living between cultures while at the same time feeling deeply connected to her country of birth.

# Something Curated

## Interview: Nigerian Painter Nengi Omuku On Precolonial Textiles, Floristry & Mental Health

JUNE 15, 2022



Nengi Omuku, *Reclining Figures*, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery. © Nengi Omuku. Photo: Mark Blower.

Something Curated: Can you give us some insight into your background and journey to art-making?

Nengi Omuku: I was born in Nigeria and grew up here up until I was about 16. I then moved to England for my A-levels and ended up studying art at the Slade School of Fine Art. The journey was pretty straightforward, I knew I wanted to study art when I was 11 and decided it would be the Slade when I was 13 – thankfully I got in!



Nengi Omuku, Kwadwo I, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery. © Nengi Omuku. Photo: Mark Blower.

SC: How has your experience as a florist and horticulturist influenced your practice?

NO: There were so many lessons learned while studying floristry and horticulture under my mother. It takes a lot to create a successful floral arrangement. For example, you have to think about blocking colours to create a semblance of flow. There's also the depth of the arrangement, not placing all the flowers on the same level so the eye can travel in and out of it. Finally, constantly stepping back to check the overall composition – these are all things that resonate with how I think about painting today. The years I spent training under my mum felt like a second masters degree to be honest.

SC: Could you expand on the enigmatic figures you depict in your works — what is the thinking behind their faceless forms?

NO: I began to think about the body in this way when I moved back to Nigeria. My preoccupation while in art school was thinking about my mind and how I processed my emotions. But in Nigeria that expanded a lot, especially when I came into contact with people struggling with their mental health. My preoccupation then became, how do you paint the mind? How does one translate a person's emotions on a surface, and how can the depiction of the body move beyond representation and focus instead on the state of mind of the sitter or the collective?



Nengi Omuku, Red Velvet, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery. © Nengi Omuku. Photo: Mark Blower.

SC: What interests you in utilising sanyan as a surface to paint on?

NO: I remember the first time I was introduced to sanyan, I knew immediately that this should be the surface of the painting and not merely an object to be depicted within the painting. It was a deeply spiritual experience, because I had spent years collecting vintage textiles from different parts of Nigeria, studying their origins and how their use has evolved over time, but sanyan stuck with me because it speaks so loudly about a rich precolonial past in Western Nigeria. It is a vessel of our heritage and an immense source of pride for me as a Nigerian artist, to be able to work collaboratively with this fabric.

Nengi Omuku, Flux, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery. © Nengi Omuku. Photo: Mark Blower

SC: How did you approach selecting the works to include in your new presentation at Pippy Houldsworth Gallery?

NO: Pretty much everything that was made in the period leading up to the show was included in the show. I am not a very prolific painter unfortunately, but every painting is a snippet from an experience, so the body of work in this show tells a fractured story, filled with metaphors and allusions to ways of finding joy



Nengi Omuku, *Comfort and Joy*, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery. © Nengi Omuku. Photo: Mark Blower.

SC: What are some of your favourite cultural spaces in Lagos?

NO: I love the new space Tiwani that has just opened in Lagos. It really is so well thought out and built and I think the art community is grateful for its presence. The new Rele Gallery is also a really exciting space run by a powerhouse of a woman. Finally the Yemisi Shyllon Museum is an architectural feat housing an incredible collection of art that spans centuries.

# artnet

## Artist Nengi Omuku Paints Portraits on Traditional Nigerian Textiles. See Inside Her Lagos Studio Here

*We caught up with the artist ahead of her first solo show with Pippy Houldsworth.*

NAOMI REA  
JUNE 7, 2022



Portrait of Nengi Omuku. Image credit: Full House Partners.

Nigerian artist Nengi Omuku has been hard at work in her studio preparing for her first solo exhibition with Pippy Houldsworth Gallery in London.

The show, titled “Parables of Joy,” will open June 10. (Omuku is co-represented by Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.)

Using oil paint on stitched-together pieces of sanyan—a traditional Nigerian fabric used for draped clothing—Omuku creates ethereal scenes of obscured figures in motion. Featureless, they take on the role of the chorus in Greek theater, and draw on themes connected to the artist’s cultural heritage, race, and personal identity.

The artist’s inspirations vary from images taken from the Nigerian press, as well as influences from nature, as she worked as a florist and horticulturalist under her mother. Her newest works react to the past two years of the pandemic and lockdowns, and efforts to reconnect with the natural world, blurring the boundaries between bodies and their natural surroundings.

We caught up with Omuku at her studio in Lagos, Nigeria, about her trusty palette knives, what’s on her playlist, and the long walks in nature that help her get moving when she feels stuck.



Nengi Omuku, *Flux* (2022). Courtesy the artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London. © Nengi Omuku 2022.

Can you send us a snap of the most indispensable item(s) in your studio and tell us why you can't live without it?

I'm quite attached to all my palette knives but there is one in particular; I've had it for about five years and I get really anxious when I misplace it. It's a little worn out, and is held together by duct tape, but it still works like a dream!



Palette knife. I cannot do without the one wrapped in duct tape. It's the only one I have that's lasted so long. Courtesy of Nengi Omuku.

What is a studio task on your agenda this week that you are most looking forward to?

Cleaning! It's been an intense period preparing for the show so I'm looking forward to having the studio deep cleaned before I go in again.



The wall. I usually prime the sanyan against a wall covered in tarp. When the primer seeps through it leaves these braille-like markings, I spend a lot of time looking at this wall. Courtesy of Nengi Omuku.

What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer silence? Why?

I always listen to music. There's a whole range from Afro beats to techno and gospel music. It totally depends on how good, or bad, it's going in the studio. If there's no music, I'm definitely having an off day.



Research corner. This is the safe and soft corner, the only part of the studio not covered in tarp and paint! I usually have lunch and dinner here. I come here to read as well. Courtesy of Nengi Omuku.

Who are your favorite artists, curators, or other thinkers to follow on social media right now?

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye—I saw her show at the Tate last year and what struck me most was the convincing way in which she painted large areas with the color white. The surface always seemed so potent in-spite of the color.

Wangechi Mutu—I've been inspired by her work ever since I was in university, particularly the way in which she thinks about the body.

David Adjaye—I find his research into past architectural feats in Africa inspiring, particularly because they inform the way he thinks about built space today.



The view from my window. Courtesy of Nengi Omuku.

Is there a picture you can send of your current work in progress at the studio?



Kwadwo. Here is a picture of one of the unfinished paintings in my current show with Pippy Houldsworth Gallery. Courtesy of Nengi Omuku.

When you feel stuck while preparing for a show, what do you do to get unstuck?

I go for a walk in nature or by the ocean. I find it calming and it helps me escape the moment I'm struggling with.



Evening walk. I go for a walk in a green space or by the ocean any time I feel stuck in the studio. Courtesy of Nengi Omuku.

What images or objects do you look at while you work? Share your view from behind the canvas or your desktop—wherever you spend the most time.

I usually have sitters in the studio, and the sitters are usually friends or people I have close relationships with. During the pandemic, when I didn't have as many studio visits, I spent a lot of time looking at press images and archival photography from Nigeria.



Nene. I have been so privileged to work with an incredible team. My studio manager Nene and my studio technician Olawale. Here's a picture of Nene sitting for a painting. Courtesy of Nengi Omuku.

What is the last exhibition you saw that made an impression on you and why?

Jennifer Packer's show at the Serpentine was really inspiring. I was blown away by her draughtsmanship, mastery of color, and the loose way she handled paint. An absolute 10/10

# ELEPHANT

## Nengi Omuku: “It’s the Only Irreplaceable Thing in My Studio”

*The artist takes five minutes out of her day to answer our eight questions.*

HOLLY BLACK

JUNE 6, 2022



Nengi Omuku, *Reclining Figures*, 2022.

Plants hold particular significance for Nengi Omuku. The Lagos-based artist trained as a florist and horticulturist under her mother before embarking on her art education at the Slade in London. The imprint of the natural world can be seen embedded in her ambiguous multimedia paintings, where indistinct figures, often seen together in tangled pairs or groups, appear surrounded by luscious trees, potted plants and other markers of flora and fauna. Her latest works, made during the intermittent lockdowns of the last two years, are filled with a particular sense of longing for a landscape beyond the confines of the home.

Instead of using traditional canvas, Omuku stitches together strips of sanyan, a Nigerian dress fabric made from wild silk, and paints on top of it. The result is something akin to a contemporary wall hanging, where works are mounted on rods, and the end of the picture plane is extended by the irregular blocks of textile that surrounds it. Occasionally, the sanyan patterns inform the palette and composition of the picture within, in a satisfying fusion of ordered tradition and mysterious, fluid figuration.

If you could save only one item from your studio, what would it be?

I'll definitely take my Nigerian sanyan fabric collection. I've bought all the sanyan I have come across over the past few years and it's the only irreplaceable thing in my studio.



Nengi Omuku, Red Velvet, 2022.

If you could save only one item from your studio, what would it be?

I'll definitely take my Nigerian sanyan fabric collection. I've bought all the sanyan I have come across over the past few years and it's the only irreplaceable thing in my studio.

What was the last art material you bought to use in your work?

I bought oil sticks while on a residency last year and I've just started working with them. I'm officially addicted! It feels like I'm colouring when I use them as opposed to painting.

What is your go-to song when you're working in the studio?

It totally depends on whether I'm stressed out or not. But my go-to song this year has been Feeling by Ladipoe. It's the right tempo and just upbeat enough without being over the top.

Which single work of art would you choose to live alongside in your home?

I live with a lot of art by people I admire. But if I could get my hands on a painting by Nigerian artist Yusuf Grillo, who died just last year, my life would actually be complete.



Nengi Omuku, *Repose*, 2022.

What are your top art or photography books?

Nigerian Weaving by Lamb and Holmes. It was a really difficult one to source but has been pivotal in my research around sanyan and pre-colonial weaving practices in Nigeria.

If money was no object, what would you most like to experiment with in your work?

I would take a year out to travel to all the West African counties to learn about their weaving traditions, and experiment with how to work with these fabrics.



Nengi Omuku, *Comfort and Joy*, 2022.

Tell us a pet peeve of yours when it comes to the art world.

Wet paint at auction.

What is your favourite gallery or museum space around the world?

Musee de l'Orangerie in Paris. I saw Monet's Waterlilies there for the first time last year. Seeing the paintings in that space was a deeply spiritual experience.

# The rise of Amazons – African female artists

BUSINESSDAY

MARCH 12, 2022

[EXTRACT]

Nengi describes her art as a language and a way of expressing herself, non-verbally with the hope that whoever sees her work can understand the sentiment she has translated through painting. Her practice is inspired by an understanding of the body that is beyond representation and focuses more on a state of mind. Nengi merges her knowledge of oil painting with the tradition of weaving which is popular in Nigeria.

Upon completing her Masters program, Nengi moved back to Nigeria where she soon started noticing that there were several mentally ill people on the streets. This birthed The Art of Healing (TOAH) which focuses on the interiority, emotions, and state of the mind. Understandably, art cannot make people well, but through her therapeutic art, Nengi seeks to uplift the spirit of people that are mentally or physically unwell.

# Nengi Omuku Paints a Cartography of Collective Strife and Solidarity

*Nengi Omuku skilfully captures the precarious atmosphere of 2020 in a vintage textile from Nigeria. But it is not all gloom.*

HANOU AMENDAH

NOVEMBER 14, 2020



Installation view of Nengi Omuku's solo exhibition "Gathering" at Kristin Hjiellegjerde Gallery, London. (Left -The Sit Down, 2020 // Middle - Seun, 2020 // Right - Technicolour Protest, 2020). Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjiellegjerde Gallery

Light flooded through the glass ceilings on the upper floor of Kristin Hjiellegjerde Gallery in London. It continued its journey refracting into tiny rays of sunlight, which filtered through the small holes of the vintage Nigerian fabric Nengi Omuku used

to replace canvas in her latest paintings. The exhibition bathed in a luminous atmosphere that sharply contrasted with the mood of the twelve paintings it encompassed, most of which examined the conflagrations of numerous social crises in Lagos, Nigeria.

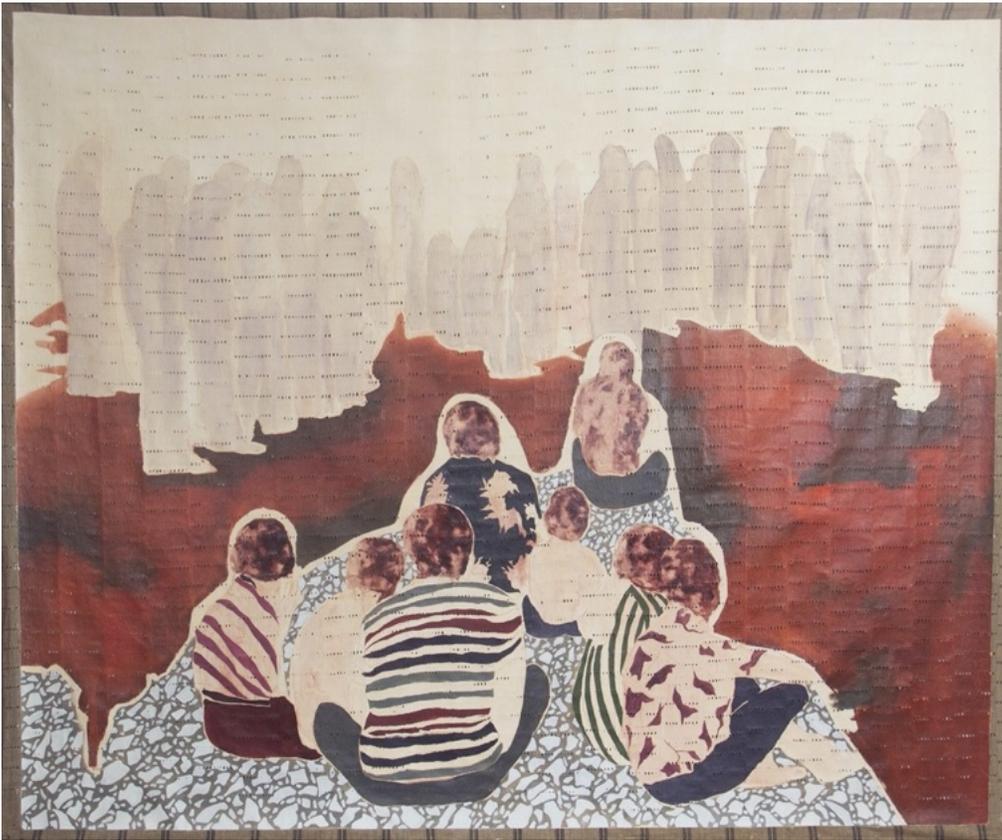
The exhibition's title, "Gathering", can be slightly misleading as it evokes joyous celebrations and happy memories. At least, that was the spirit of "And co", a rectangular piece featuring a wedding celebration. Although the bride and groom were the reason this joyous crowd congregated, they were not the centre of attention in the painting. From their peripheral position in the lower right corner, the couple locked in a tender embrace left most of the pictorial plane to be animated by their happy guests sporting matching green outfits. These seemingly supporting characters basking in the couple's joy were in effect the artwork's main subjects.

The joyous outlook of the painting was deliberate. On the day of the preview, narrowly brought forward to accommodate a single day of public viewing before a second national lockdown took effect in the UK, Omuku explained: "After [...] everything this year has been, I wanted a painting that looked forward as opposed to reflecting. It is mostly about love." The cheerful painting was somewhat the touch of hope, the light at the end of a tunnel of social and economic misery deftly rendered through a blend of astute composition and the recurrent use of a neutral palette of colours.

By contrast, "The Sit Down", one of the most remarkable works in the exhibition, was filled with palpable tension. A small group of people with hunched shoulders and backs turned away from the viewers sat on a triangular-shaped surface. They faced a standing line up of ghost-looking antagonists. A red sea of anger and recriminations kept the two groups apart. The painting depicted a fictional scene inspired by the protests, which motorcycle drivers organised when the Nigerian government banned the use of two-wheelers and tricycles as taxis. With no real transitional measures in place, removing the affordable and popular mode of transport left thousands of young drivers jobless and urban dwellers stranded. Pathos in the exhibition reached its apex with "Gathering," a harrowing scene of mourning. A crowd of non-identifiable people, drawn with smudged faces, congregated to mourn a lost life. Life, like the paint, dripped away from the body carefully laid down diagonally through the work.

The paintings, all created this year, were mostly informed by a string of real-life crises in Lagos, making the exhibition a delicate cartography of collective strife and remembrance. Omuku explained how these injustices came to take such a pre-eminent space in her work. "It got to me. It got to me and to the point where I couldn't ignore it, and I had to start painting about it."

It was utterly fortuitous that the show coincided with yet another political crisis. This time, Nigeria made the headlines for the repression of peaceful demonstrations against police brutality. And in a twisted case of life imitating art, "The Sit Down" became almost a depiction of reality.



Nengi Omuku, *The Sit Down* (2020), Oil on Sanyan. Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjiellegerde Gallery



Nengi Omuku, *Gathering* (2020), Oil on Sanyan. Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjiellegerde Gallery

It would be tempting to reduce the narrative of this exhibition to the stereotypical view of an African nation endowed with vast natural resources yet crippled by decades of mismanagement that has left the majority of the population living in

abject conditions. However, Omuku successfully steered clear of such reductive views and constructed a multilayered visual narrative that highlighted the complex nature of Nigeria as a nation.

To those unfamiliar with Nigeria, the recent unrest may come as a surprise. However, it is happening on the back of recurring social and economic conflicts that lay a flammable foundation awaiting a spark to ignite. While revisiting the poignant moments that led to the current conflict, the artist put the emphasis, not on those in power, they are the ghost figures in “The Sit Down”, but on those who drew the short end of the social stick. In sorrow, in grief, in protest, they gathered, and their bodies merged to form one collective unit.

Naturally, Omuku’s views are informed by her highly emotive perspective on the role of the artist. “I think for me, the artist’s primary position should always be empathy. I think if you approach the world through that lens, the lens of empathy, you see things clearer, you speak about things in a more honest way [...] Some of these paintings are my ways of mourning the people that have lost or protesting with the people that have had the injustice or sitting with the people that are asking for answers. So everything is from a place of empathy.”

Even if “Technicolour Protest” captured a flash of rage, this collective unit is mostly activated by solidarity and a deep sense of fellowship, the like of which is best described in Small Chaos. A group of bystanders turned first responders depicted rescuing children from the ruins of a building that collapsed. Time and again, the artworks reiterated people’s unwavering commitment to their communities.



Installation view of Nengi Omuku’s solo exhibition “Gathering” at Kristin Hjiellegerde Gallery, London. (L-Remorse, stolen knickers, 2020 // R - What was Lost, 2020) Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjiellegerde Gallery

The focus on people conveyed the feeling that maybe the real wealth of Nigeria didn't lie in the underbelly of its rich soil but firmly on the ground, in its millions of inhabitants and their rich cultural heritage. A cultural heritage encapsulated in the vintage fabric, Sanyan, also known as Aso Oke. Omuku discovered the material in 2019, soon after settling in Lagos, when she asked friends to bring her Nigerian textiles. It was part of an effort to re-immense herself into the local culture through the fabric after spending years abroad. The vintage woven textiles became "part and parcel" of her work, a conciliatory space where old and new, craft, and art meet to form new contemporaneous narratives.

At this time when political positions are entrenched in Nigeria, and dark clouds hang over the country, the symbolism of these paintings, their rootedness in empathy shine as a beacon of light for what we all hope is a brighter future.

## Painting the Collective: An Interview with Nengi Omuku

*As Nengi Omuku's solo exhibition 'Gathering' reopens in London, the artist discusses how her interest in crowds was inspired by protests in Nigeria and her own isolation* Pippy Houldsworth Gallery presents 'Parables of Joy', the first solo exhibition of works by Nigerian-born Nengi Omuku at the gallery.

MILLIE WALTON

12 APRIL 2020



*Room with a View, 2020, oil on sanyan, 130 x 190 cm*

Nigerian artist Nengi Omuku's latest series of large scale paintings – currently on display in her solo exhibition *Gathering* at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery London Bridge – mark a shift away from singular vibrant portraits to groups of spectral figures who appear, at times, to be fading, streams of watery paint dripping down the surface.

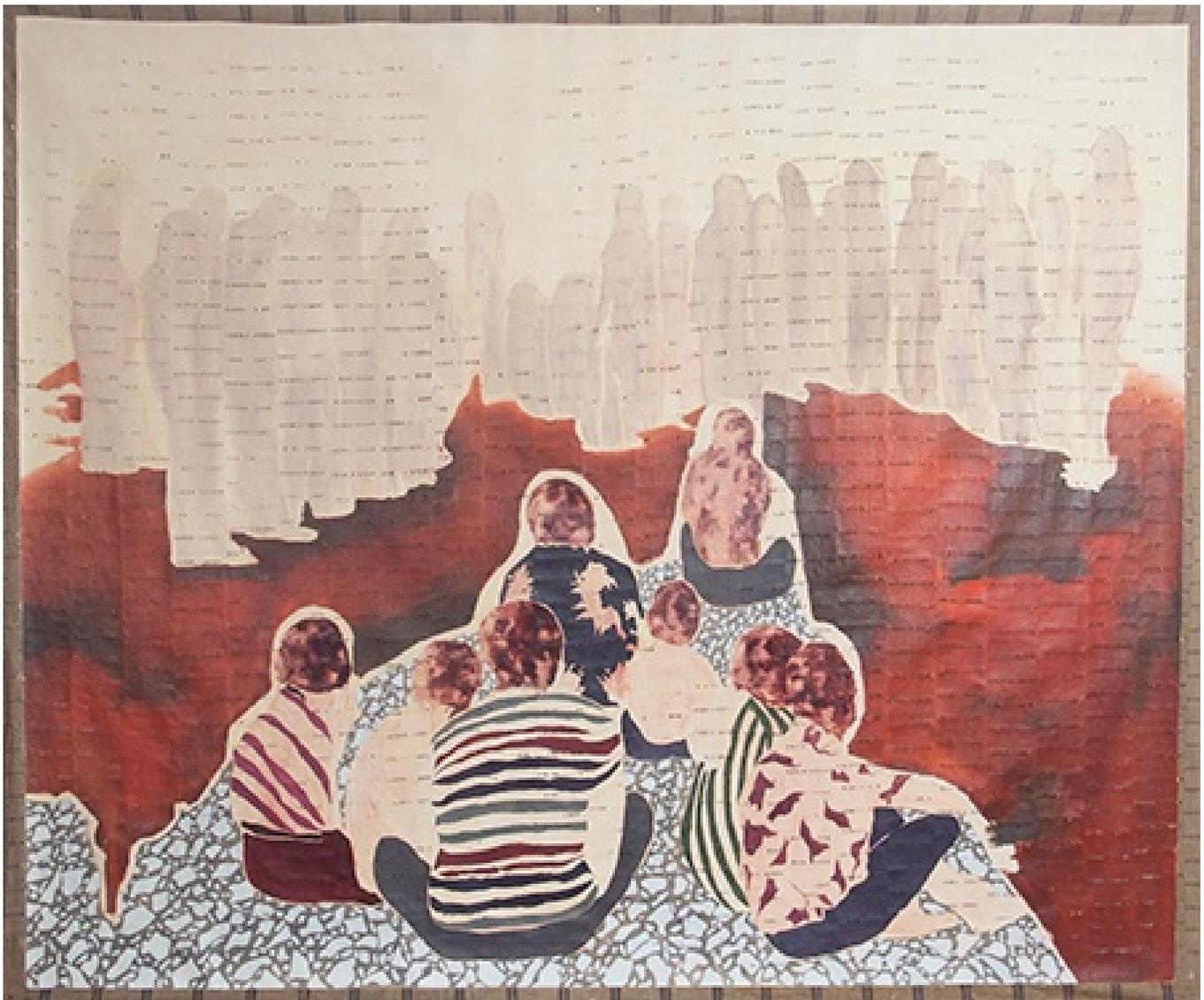
Though classically trained, Omuku paints onto a traditional Nigerian fabric known as Sanyan, giving her works a distinct physical quality that links to her central thematic focus on representations of the body in relation to cultural identity and emotional turmoil.

These latest works are based on archival and press photography which the artist selected during her research into why and how people gather, and whilst it's no coincidence that many of the scenes resonate with protests and collective mourning across the globe, it is the negative space that makes these works so haunting.

In the work entitled *Room with a View*, for example, the patterned floor is the most concrete element whilst the painting's protagonist – a woman – is smudged and dripping; the sofa on which she is lying seems to have been erased; and her shoes are blank space. The effect is strangely destabilising – the image itself appears to be wavering, immaterial. Added to this, the fabric itself contains tiny holes and when the works are hung away from the wall – as they have been in the show – the light passes through to create ephemeral patterns that appear almost like the painting's ghost, or, if we were to really stretch the concept to its limits, a kind of spiritual abstraction. In any case, it makes for an intriguing viewing experience. Millie Walton spoke to Omuku about some of the inspirations behind these works and the evolution of her painting style. *When did this latest series of paintings begin?*

The work about protests and collective mourning started at the beginning of the year. The first painting I made was the piece called *Gathering* and that was based on photos and press images of a building that collapsed near my studio and people coming together to rescue or to mourn. It was a horrible thing that happened, and as the year progressed, a lot of bad things were happening in Lagos and so it became really hard for me to paint pretty pictures. I felt that I didn't have the luxury of painting things that just made me happy anymore; I had to start looking outward, and speaking about things that were happening in Lagos.

After that first incident, came mass unemployment for the public transport workers who quietly protested and the government shut them down. Then, Covid hit and reliefs were apparently given out, but no one received them. Recently, stories are being released about politicians who stored all of the reliefs in their houses and are saying 'Oh yes, we kept them for our birthday parties and then we were going to give it out,' which is so ridiculous. Some of them are so out of touch with reality. All of this, I think, is what inspired the artwork *The Sit Down* which is one of the largest pieces in the show. One day, I had this very strong image in my head of people sitting and appealing to a crowd of people in the background to make things better.



*The Sit Down, 2020, oil on sanyan, 193 x 234 cm*

Three days before I came to London the end SARS protests began. People rose up collectively and started protesting. Nigeria is a very divided place. There are so many different groups of people who have been forced to exist as a unified entity, but the end SARS movement was a unifying force.

I was already aware that the work I had been making throughout the year was beginning to resonate on a different kind of level because of the protests and then two days after I arrived in London, the Lekki massacre happened. People were peacefully protesting in Lagos and a stream of military personnel opened fire. The protestors were told if you sit down, wave the Nigerian flag and sing the National anthem it's against the law for the police to attack you, I don't know if that's true, but that's what they had been told and that's what they did. There are videos of them sitting and singing. Still today, they don't know how many people died and there are rumours that some of the bodies were stolen to hide evidence.

*Do you think that these contexts have or will change the way your viewers perceive the work?*

I began painting the scenes just before the Black Lives Matter Movement started in the US and a lot of people were asking me then if I was painting about BLM and I said, 'No, I'm painting about a black experience and what's happening in Nigeria.' Now, a lot of people have asked me whether it's about the end SARS protests, but if people relate to the images based off what's happening in Nigeria at the moment and the use of gathering, that is enough for me. I'm not too concerned whether people think the work was reactionary or preemptive just as long as people can relate to the work.

*Crowds and the idea of gathering more generally has taken on huge significance since the beginning of coronavirus. Was that something you were also thinking about?*

Yes, it was my own isolation that made me start looking at groups of people and how and why people gather.

*What inspired you to start painting on sanyan fabric?*

What drew me to fabric in the first place was noticing, after I'd moved back to Nigeria from England, how clothes that people were wearing were used to identify where they came from. Dress is a really big thing in Nigeria and each state and tribe has their particular dress. So, in each state I went to, I started to ask people to bring me their traditional materials. At first I noticed that people were wearing a lot of dutch wax print which people call African print, but it's not actually African. I wanted to look deeper to a pre-colonial understanding of dress in Nigeria. I asked people to bring vintage fabrics and I started by using those as inspiration for clothes for the bodies that I was painting.

Then when I moved to Lagos, someone bought me Sanyan, which is a pre-colonial material originally made from silk and industrial cotton produced by moths in northern Nigeria and transported down to the west for trade. When I saw this material, it was like a spiritual experience for me; the feel of it, the craftsmanship, its history and age. I wanted this fabric to become the body of the work, and it has changed the way I paint because it's a very rough surface. My brush marks are much looser and my style has adjusted.



*Installation view of Gathering*

*In many of these paintings, you've left large spaces of raw fabric. Is this because you want the viewers to notice the surface?*

It's two things really. When I was painting on canvas I would sometimes cover the entire surface because it was about image-making and when I started working on Sanyan, the first few paintings were the same, but recently, I realised that there's so much beauty in the rawness of the surface. I also wanted to leave breathing space within the work so that I'm not entirely dictating how the viewer should feel, and so that the surface can speak for itself. I want the work to be more like a collaboration between this ancient material and oil painting which is also ancient but from a different tradition. I'm Nigerian, but I've been trained in a very western way of making art, and I want those two things to breathe on the same surface and have equal weight.

*The blank space combined with the faceless, dripping figures gives the work a surreal, dreamlike quality. Is that important for you?*

I'm glad you say that because even though my works may sometimes appear figurative, I'm always thinking about how you paint the mind. That's really the initiating point for the mark making. I want to show the body as multifaceted and in motion. We may appear one way from the outside, but there's a lot of inner turmoil that goes on within, psychologically. The way in which I paint the body evolved out of my interest in mental health and a person's psychological space. I was interested in how you begin to talk about trauma, anxiety and emotions through painting.

*The absence of faces seems to fit with that idea and is also suggestive of a kind of anonymity or universality.*

Yes, absolutely. I want the work to be relatable. It's about the experience of being human – that's really what's at the heart of it. The qualities of being human, in spite of race or nationality or whatever. Of course, I am painting from the perspective of a black woman but I still really want to touch other people's lives, for them to be able to feel and relate to the work.



*Flower power, 2020, oil on sanyan, 90 x 110 cm*

*In the past your work focused more on the female body, but these works seem to feature more masculine figures. Was this an intentional shift?*

Some of the bodies in the foreground are male, but it relates specifically to what I'm painting about at the moment which is the unrest in Nigeria and there were a lot of male figures in the source photos that I was looking at. To be honest, though, I see a lot of the bodies becoming genderless. I'm not really describing bodies based on gender.

## Discovering the Undiscovered: Armory Show's Focus This Year on African Art

2016



*Nengi Omuku, Boys Follow Me, 2016, Omenka Gallery*



*Nengi Omuku, Together Forever, 2014, Omenka Gallery*

### [EXTRACT]

Omuku was born in Nigeria and educated at the Slade School of Art at the University College of London; she currently lives and works in Port Harcourt. She has won multiple awards, including the prestigious British Council CHOGM art award, presented by HRH Queen Elizabeth II in 2003. Her work often features floating spaces and metaphoric figures and shapes in vibrant colors, evoking a sense of escapism.