



## Nike Davies-Okundaye

### Art Basel Miami Beach

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Survey | **Booth S5**

Nike Davies-Okundaye (b. 1951, Ogidi, Nigeria) is a textile artist who is celebrated as a national icon in Nigeria for her embrace and elevation of the traditional arts. Nike's artistic career emerged as part of the Osogbo Art Movement of the 1960s in newly independent Nigeria, re-imagining traditional Yoruba art and spirituality through a modernist lens. Using vivid colors and bold geometric patterns, her work explores narratives of family, daily life, womanhood, and Yoruba folklore, drawing from both personal experiences and cultural memory. This presentation features early embroidery, bead painting and quilts created between the 1960s and 1980s.

Nike Davies-Okundaye is a fifth-generation textile artist, raised in the lineage of Yoruba women who passed down the traditions of Adire dyeing, embroidery, and weaving. With no formal art education, Nike began learning from her great-grandmother at the age of six. Inspired by the cultural significance of these practices as a form of “women’s art” passed through generations, she has dedicated her life to preserving and evolving these traditions. Her work frequently explores Adire, a Yoruba resist-dye technique using indigo on hand-painted cloth. These designs carry layered cultural and historical meanings, forming complex patterns recognized within Yoruba visual culture.

The Osogbo Art School, as it came to be known, developed informally from the restless creative energy of the post-independence era in Nigeria. The movement grew at a time when Osogbo, a small Yoruba town, was becoming a vibrant counter-cultural center. The Osogbo School emerged from a series of experimental art workshops held between 1962–1966 at Mbari Mbayo, an informal club formed to promote theatre and visual art, in collaboration with several international artists and intellectuals living in Osogbo at the time. Largely outside formal art-school training, the artists forged highly original approaches to painting, textile, and mixed media, drawing on Yoruba mythology, performance, and modern life. Although Nike was not a formal participant in the Mbari Mbayo workshops, she has become one of the most celebrated figures associated with the Osogbo Art School and a pioneering force in preserving Nigeria's textile traditions. Nike was married to artist Twins Seven-Seven, the most widely known artist of the Osogbo School, from the 1960s to the early 1980s. Both artists came of age artistically at the same moment, and both exchanged similar experiments, themes, and techniques in their own practices.

Nike's early embroidery was often stitched onto burlap sacks, their rough edges left uncropped. Nike sourced the jute material from local traders selling beans, and she would agree to carry water for them in exchange for the free material after it had been used. These works depict narrative scenes featuring archetypal Yoruba community figures—farmers, market women, drummers, and palm wine tappers—as well as deities such as Sango and Olokun. The striking contrast between monochromatic backgrounds and the vivid, almost



psychedelic hues of her threads conjures a surreal, dream-like atmosphere. Nike's early embroidery is currently presented at Tate Modern's exhibition, *Nigerian Modernism*.

In her beadwork, Davies-Okundaye often draws on personal experience, embedding autobiographical elements through metaphor and symbolism. This presentation features some of Nike's earliest bead works from 1967-68, where she incorporated wood sculptural relief. While this technique of wood sculptural relief was widely associated with her then husband, celebrated Nigerian artist Twins Seven-Seven, these early works reveal Nike's early involvement and simultaneous development of the technique in her own practice. The presentation also includes Nike's work, *The Lost Monkey* (1985), where a central stylized figure is flanked by a golden deer-like creature and a large black feline, symbolizing protection and spiritual guardianship. Nike's early bead works are included in prestigious institutional collections, including the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York.

Despite working in private during her early years, often stitching by candlelight to keep her work away from her husband, Nike's career has spanned over five decades. In 1968, she held her first solo exhibition at the Goethe-Institut in Lagos. By 1974, Nike was among ten African artists selected to tour the United States, conducting workshops and lectures across all fifty states. She has since served as a guest lecturer on traditional textile techniques at institutions worldwide, including Harvard University.

Her work is held in the permanent collections of major institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York; High Museum of Art; the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art; Guggenheim Abu Dhabi; the British Library; the Victoria and Albert Museum; the American Museum of Natural History; Princeton University Art Museum; Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth; and the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College.

Nike is a tireless advocate for women in the arts and craft industries. Affectionately known as "Mama Nike," she is the founder and director of four art centers in Nigeria that offer free training in visual, musical, and performing arts. She also established Nike Art Gallery in Lagos, the largest private art gallery in Africa, housing over 8,000 works across five floors. In 2000, Nike was invited by the Italian government to train young Nigerian sex workers in Italy in traditional crafts. This initiative helped over 5,000 women learn Adire production, weaving, and other art forms, empowering them to build sustainable livelihoods. For this work, she received recognition from the United Nations and was awarded one of Italy's highest national honors for using art to address social issues. In 2004, she was appointed to the UNESCO Committee of the Nigerian Intangible Cultural Heritage Project, and in 2005, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments of Nigeria awarded her a certificate of excellence for her contributions to cultural preservation. Nike holds the chieftaincy titles of the Yeye Oba of Ogidi-Ijumu and the Yeye Tasase of Oshogbo.

### **About kó**

kó is an art space based in Lagos, Nigeria, that is dedicated to promoting modern and contemporary art. kó has a dual focus in championing Nigeria's leading artists from the modern period and celebrating emerging and established contemporary artists across Africa and the Diaspora.

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