

Frieze Masters Adebisi Fabunmi

October 14-18, 2026

Spotlight | **Booth S18**

kó is pleased to participate in Frieze Masters with a solo presentation of Nigerian modernist Adebisi Fabunmi, bringing together rare paintings and works on paper from the 1960s-1970s. This presentation is included in *Spotlight*, the curated section of Frieze Masters dedicated to global perspectives on twentieth-century modern art.

Adebisi Fabunmi (1945–2023) was a pioneering modern artist of Nigeria's Osogbo Art School, an informal artistic movement that emerged in the 1960s at the dawn of Nigeria's independence. Developed through a series of experimental art workshops held in the southwestern Yoruba town of Osogbo between 1962-1966, the movement fostered a generation of artists who translated Yoruba history, mythology, and design through the formal concerns of modernism. Adebisi ("Bisi") Fabunmi emerged as one of the Osogbo School's early leading figures, developing a distinctive visual language characterised by rhythmic line, flattened perspective, and densely patterned compositions. His paintings incorporate Yoruba cosmology and folklore within urban architectural landscapes, bringing mythic narratives into dialogue with the realities of modern life.

The Osogbo Art School came together through the activities of several international and Nigerian artists and intellectuals living in the town in the 1960s, including German professor Ulli Beier, British artist Georgina Betts Beier, Austrian artist Susanne Wenger, and Nigerian playwright Duro Ladipo. Its origins can be traced to the Mbari Club in Ibadan, founded by Beier in 1961 as a cultural meeting place connected to the intellectual community around the University of Ibadan. In Osogbo, Beier sought to extend the spirit of Mbari into a more informal, community-based setting. Mbari Mbayo, its name derived from a Yoruba phrase meaning "when we see it, we shall be happy," opened in Osogbo and became a nucleus of this emerging movement. Outside of formal art-school training, these artists forged highly original approaches to painting, printmaking, textile, and mixed media, retaining a cohesive visual language rooted in Yoruba culture.

Adebisi Fabunmi was born in 1945 in the seaport town of Takoradi, Ghana, to Nigerian Yoruba parents from Okemesi. He was sent to Nigeria at the age of nine, and subsequently moved between cities and supported himself through a succession of jobs, including work as a truck pusher and sailor. Fabunmi eventually settled in Osogbo in 1962, and began painting cinema signboards and theatrical backdrops before joining Duro Ladipo's theatre company. In 1964, he performed with Ladipo's troupe at the Berlin Theatre Festival in Germany. That same year, Fabunmi participated in Georgina Beier's Third Experimental Art School at Mbari Mbayo. Following the workshop, Beier selected a small group of promising participants, with Fabunmi as a core member, to continue working as full-time studio artists. Supported with modest stipends, materials, and daily guidance, they developed their own techniques and styles over the following two years. This group became known as the Osogbo Artists, including Fabunmi, Twins Seven-Seven, Rufus Ogundele, Muraina Oyelami, Jimoh Buraimoh, and Jacob Afolabi.

This presentation includes two of Fabunmi's earliest known paintings. ***Animal Dance*** (1964) depicts two red-toned animal figures within a densely compressed landscape of clustered rooftops, introducing the relationship between Yoruba mythology and the lived environment of Osogbo that would become central to his practice. ***Elders*** (1964) turns to the social life of Osogbo, depicting a group of older men gathered around a game of *ayo*, a traditional Yoruba board game. Already visible are many of the formal characteristics he would develop over the following decades: flattened perspective, simplified forms, bold contours, and the compression of figures and architecture into a single pictorial field. In these early works, Fabunmi transforms Osogbo from a literal setting into an imaginative space.

This presentation also includes a group of pastel works on paper from the late 1960s and 1970s that reveals Fabunmi's unique abstract approach to storytelling. Across these works, ambiguous forms are broken apart and reassembled. Broad passages of color are divided by irregular geometric shapes. Foreground and background often merge, allowing images to appear gradually within compositions that at first seem abstract. In ***Jungle Spirit*** (1968), a pale animal-like figure emerges from a landscape of intersecting forms. The title situates the work within a Yoruba conception of the natural environment as a realm in which spiritual forces may be present. ***The Wrestler*** (1970) depicts two figures engaged in a wrestling match, their bodies meeting at the center. Other works move more freely between personal experience and mythological subjects.

During the 1970s, Fabunmi's paintings became increasingly ambitious in scale and compositional complexity. This presentation includes two large-scale paintings on canvas. Across the panoramic surface, human faces, mask-like forms, animals, birds, vegetation, and other enigmatic shapes are interwoven within a dense network of geometric pattern and curving black line. Fabunmi's palette also becomes more intricate, giving the surface an almost mosaic-like intensity. At this large scale, the composition recalls his formative work producing sets and painted backdrops for Duro Ladipo's theatre company. ***Royalty (The Taste of Power)*** (1978) brings Fabunmi's mature style to the subject of Yoruba kingship and authority. Three

monumental figures stand tightly together, their elongated bodies extending the full height of the canvas. Presented frontally, they possess a commanding, almost sculptural presence, while their simplified faces, enlarged eyes, and highly stylised features draw upon the visual traditions of Yoruba carving.

Fabunmi's career developed rapidly alongside the international emergence of the Osogbo School. His first solo exhibition was held at the United States Information Service in Ibadan in 1965, followed by Mbari Mbayo, Osogbo, in 1966. Between 1965-1978, he presented thirteen solo exhibitions in Nigeria. Internationally, his work first appeared in the exhibition *Moderne Kunst aus Oshogbo* at the Neue Münchner Galerie, Munich in 1965, which traveled to Traverse Gallery and Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh, Scotland. His work subsequently appeared in the exhibition *Contemporary African Art* at the Camden Arts Centre, London (1969), and the Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles (1969), whose exhibition toured museums and universities across the United States until 1973, including the Studio Museum of Harlem, New York University, University of Missouri, and Cleveland Institute of Art.

Over the following decades, Fabunmi's work continued to circulate internationally, with exhibitions at the Musée de l'Homme, Paris (1970); Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna (1970); American University, Washington, D.C. (1970); University of California, Los Angeles (1971); Náprstek Museum, Prague (1972); Howard University, Washington, D.C. (1973); E. B. Crocker Art Gallery, Sacramento (1974); Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (1974); Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam (1980); Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, London (1985); and Africa Centre, London (1990). In 1989, Iwalewa-Haus in Bayreuth organised a major retrospective of his work. More recently, his paintings were featured prominently in *Nigerian Modernism* at Tate Modern, London (2025).

Fabunmi's work is held in the collections of the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College; Iwalewa-Haus, Bayreuth; the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; the Sidney and Lois Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana University; the Lagos State House of Assembly; Lagos State House; United Bank for Africa; and the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

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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