Art Basel Paris
Uche Okeke
Obiora Udechukwu
El Anatsui

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Premise | **Booth P10**

kó is pleased to participate at Art Basel Paris with a curated presentation examining three pioneering modern artists of Nigeria's Nsukka School: Uche Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu, and El Anatsui. Bringing together works from the 1960s-2000s, this presentation explores the development of the Nsukka School through successive generations of artists, educators, and leaders of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Grounded in the philosophy of *Natural Synthesis*, which encouraged artists to engage indigenous artistic traditions as a foundation for contemporary practice, the Nsukka School found particular inspiration in *uli*, the Igbo tradition of mural and body painting known for its fluid lines, organic forms, and expressive use of space. Together, their work reveals how a shared artistic and intellectual foundation found expression through different materials and modes of practice over five decades, contributing to a movement that has profoundly shaped the visual language and pedagogical discourse of modern and contemporary art in Nigeria.

Uche Okeke (1933-2016, Nigeria) is widely recognised as a leading force in the formation of what became known as the Nsukka School, particularly through his modern transformation of *uli* design. In the 1950s, while a student at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University), Okeke led a group of young artists of the Zaria Art Society, who challenged the dominance of the European-oriented curriculum then prevailing in formal art education. Their resistance, which preceded Nigeria's independence, reflected a determination to establish an artistic language grounded in African cultural knowledge and experience. Through their efforts, they became aptly known as the "Zaria Rebels". Okeke articulated this ambition through his concept of *Natural Synthesis*, which advocated creatively integrating indigenous artistic principles, materials, and sensibilities with ideas and techniques from other traditions.

Obiora Udechukwu (b. 1946, Nigeria), who studied under Okeke at Nsukka in the early 1970s, developed this vision in distinctive ways. After transferring from Zaria in 1966, before the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, he returned to his studies after the conflict and began exploring the expressive possibilities of uli in his drawings and paintings. For both artists, the war was a defining historical experience that profoundly shaped their artistic and literary imaginations. Its devastation, displacement, and human suffering found expression in works that drew upon the formal economy and emotional intensity of *uli*.

Traditional *uli* art, practised predominantly by women, is distinguished by its fluid lines, delicate textures, rhythmic patterns, and confident use of unoccupied space. Practitioners typically worked without preparatory sketches, allowing forms to emerge spontaneously through a sensitive negotiation of line, colour, and surface. Rather than merely borrowing these visual characteristics, Okeke and Udechukwu adapted their underlying principles into a contemporary artistic language that could address the social, cultural, and political realities of modern Nigeria. Their practices also helped sustain the tradition of the artist-poet at Nsukka, where visual experimentation and literary expression became mutually enriching modes of cultural engagement.

El Anatsui (b. 1944, Ghana) joined the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at Nsukka in 1975, arriving from his native Ghana at a time when Okeke and Udechukwu, alongside colleagues such as Chike Aniakor and Chuka Amaefuna, were actively developing the creative and intellectual currents associated with the Nsukka School. Anatsui had already begun exploring the possibilities of cultural synthesis through his engagement with materials, processes, and artistic ideas drawn from his immediate environment and beyond. At Nsukka, he found a stimulating atmosphere in which cultural inheritance was not a fixed body of forms to be preserved, but a dynamic resource for experimentation and reinvention. Unlike Okeke and Udechukwu, whose principal media included painting, drawing, and printmaking, Anatsui initially concentrated on sculpture, working with wood and clay before expanding his practice to incorporate found metals and other materials. The chainsaw, in particular, offered him a means of producing incisions and surfaces that evoked the destructive effects of colonial exploitation on African environments, resources, and cultures. The tool thus became both an instrument of artistic production and a political metaphor. Over time, Anatsui expanded this vocabulary through other power tools, employing them to inscribe, draw, and write upon wood in ways that transformed the material into a field of gestures, marks, and histories.

Together, these three artists speak of war and displacement, labour and resistance, cultural memory and creative freedom. They also show how the most modest marks, the simplest lines, or the forceful incision of a tool can become instruments for thinking through the complexities of history and human experience. In their hands, paper and wood become surfaces of inscription, and artistic practice becomes a form of testimony. Ultimately, the enduring significance of Okeke, Udechukwu, and Anatsui lies not merely in their association with the Nsukka School, but in their demonstration that modern African art can emerge from a critical engagement with indigenous knowledge while remaining open to experimentation, exchange, and transformation. Their practices reveal that cultural inheritance is neither a limitation nor a retreat into the past; it is a living resource through which artists can interrogate the present and imagine alternative futures.

This presentation includes curatorial text from Ozioma Onuzulike, Professor of Ceramic Art and African Art/Design History at University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

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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