



Lean on Me

April 29-May 26, 2023

Elladj Lincy Deloumeaux
Yagazie Emezi
Sesse Elangwe
Turiya Magadlela
Collins Obijiaku
Stephen Price

kó is pleased to present *Lean On Me*, a group exhibition curated by Brice Arsène Yonkeu which explores interpersonal relations and transnational connections in postcolonial Africa, featuring Elladj Lincy Deloumeaux, Yagazie Emezi, Sesse Elangwe, Turiya Magadlela, Collins Obijiaku, and Stephen Price.

Through the lens of six contemporary artists who provide substantial contributions to contemporary discourses, this exhibition aims to assess how the visual dialogue African artists participate in can ultimately unite us and become a tool to lean on. The exhibition reinforces the important role art has always played in connecting individuals and sharing history. Art and culture have the ability to shape our thinking, by penetrating our subconscious and revealing within us feelings that we have suppressed or long forgotten.

Taking its title from a poem written by the curator, *Lean On Me* is a visual representation and artistic continuation of postcolonial theories and ideas expressed by African thinkers and writers, mainly Chinua Achebe, Achille Mbembe and Leonora Miano. Through different forms of language, we can create a space that appears as the precursor to an achieved unity, “a mirror in which everyone would recognize their own face,” writes Leonara Miano in her Afrofuturistic novel *Rouge Impératrice* when describing the capital of a unified Africa a century from now.

*Lean On Me,
Because as a Brother I have your back.
Lean On Me,
Because as a Human I can feel your pain.
Lean On Me,
Because in this spirit of togetherness, your win is my win.*

Yonkeu states: “This stanza clouded my thoughts as I explored the works of the artists featured in this exhibition, forcing on me this title when I could have easily borrowed Achille Mbembe’s *Out of the Dark Nights*. In this book, which gathers Mbembe’s essays and thoughts on decolonization, he writes that ‘to free oneself once and for all from colonial alienation, and to heal the wounds inflicted by the law of race, one had to know oneself.’ The duality present in this statement led me to consider the division of the exhibition space into two parts. The first part focuses on identity and the knowing of oneself; and the second part depicts the warm embrace of renewed consciousness and identity.”

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The exhibition opens with the works of Yagazie Emezi, Turiya Magadlela and Stephen Price to investigate the construction of identity in postcolonial Africa. Emezi contributes to this conversation with photographs from her series *Wayward*, which delves into the complexities of Igbo cosmology and ontology, with a keen focus on the duality between the spiritual world and the physical world we inhabit, questioning what may arise when *mmadu* is disconnected from their personal deity. In symbiosis with her chi — the spiritual force inextricably linked to her existence and residing in her according to Igbo cosmology and ontology — Emezi hand-makes masquerades and uses the pieces in recurring self-portraiture to explore the multiple layers of the spirit world. The series offers a transcendent lens into the consequences of dissonance from our own destinies. The artist's personal quest, highlights contemporary conversations on the friction and coexistence in postcolonial Africa of imported religions, and native African religions or beliefs.

Continuing with the mixed media abstract works of Turiya Magadlela, who sews, embroiders, and manipulates found textiles such as pantyhose and stockings to explore themes of identity, gender and race, Magadlela draws inspiration from her own experiences as a woman living in South Africa. Through the irregular forms created by stretched pantyhose on stretcher bars, or the mosaic assemblage of textiles into tapestry, Magadlela creates distinct abstract works onto which viewers can project a myriad of thoughts, challenging the status quo while simultaneously perceiving its effects. Opposite Magadlela's works are three human size nude portraits executed by Stephen Price using acrylic, charcoal, and soft pastels on canvas. Inspired by Edvard Munch 1908 painting titled *Youth* and guided by a quote of art critic John Berger stating that "to be naked is to be oneself... to be naked is to be without disguise," Price attempts with these paintings to evoke the vulnerability and sincerity of his human subjects. Price's textured subjects are depicted standing in front of abstract landscapes, exuding a certain innocence that beckons the viewer's soft gaze into this space where existential questions are raised in hope of getting answers.

The conversation closes with a second part of the exhibition featuring the works of Elladj Lincy Deloumeaux, Sesse Elangwe, and Collins Obijaku whose portraits embody a sense of new consciousness and display a sense of pride attached to an identity claim. In this regard, Deloumeaux's work plunges us into a pictorial narrative where anecdotes of a personal history and the chronicles of a plural world intermingle. The subjects represented in these works on paper emerge or seem to grow out of a clouded and blurry past, to embrace this new found understanding of oneself, which will henceforth constitute a core strength.

Sesse Elangwe's realistic acrylic portraits of women outdoors surrounded by picturesque landscapes call for a pause and act as a space to reflect. However, there is consideration and contemplation for a future together made possible by his signature large eye of enlightenment which draws the viewer in. His subjects' colorful natural plaited hair and their hyper-pigmented dark skins, represent the unapologetic acceptance of oneself, and the definite resolution to be seen and visible in any given space. Using oil and charcoal on canvas, Collins Obijaku creates a highly detailed and realistic depiction of a woman wearing red lipstick. Obijaku contours his subject's with thin charcoal lines to create intricate patterns imbued with a sense of storytelling and cultural richness that capture her spirit and vitality while accentuating her features. Staring straight ahead, she appears confident and victorious.