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Ngozi-Omeje Ezema

Boundless Vases

The New Nsukka School series

28 January - 11 February 2021

Acknowledgements

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COVER:

FRONT COVER: *Vase #14*, 2020, Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal

FRONTISPIECE: Exhibition installation view

BACK COVER: *Vase #9*, 2020, Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal

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kó is pleased to present a solo exhibition by Ngozi-Omeje Ezema, titled *Boundless Vases*. This exhibition is the first part of our three-exhibition series titled *The New Nsukka School*, which re-examines the conceptual and material practices that characterise the art department at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. This series will also include solo exhibitions by Eva Obodo and Ozioma Onuzulike — all three artists who currently teach at the university.

The Nsukka School has long been referenced as a descriptive term for artists who have studied and taught at Fine and Applied Arts Department at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in Southeastern Nigeria. An important center for art education in Nigeria, the experimental trajectory of the post-Civil War art department at Nsukka was spearheaded by Uche Okeke and Chike Aniakor in the early 1970s, and has subsequently been led by prominent artists including Obiora Udechukwu and El Anatsui.

This shared artistic vision reveals itself in the experimentation with materials and technical processes, and a critical approach to art production. Many of these artists incorporate found objects from nature and the built environment, which are used to create immersive sculptural installations. The Nsukka School is best known for the revival of Uli, an Igbo art tradition that was historically used for body art and wall murals, placing this visual language into contemporary art discourses.

Boundless Vases presents a series of recent ceramic works by Ngozi-Omeje Ezema, using the vessel and the leaf motif as metaphors for issues relating to womanhood. Ngozi-Omeje's installations are a mesmerising feat of technical precision, incorporating hundreds of suspended ceramic fragments, which collectively form the whole.

Kavita Chellaram
Founder, kó

The New Nsukka School

Dr. George Odoh

From January-April 2021, kó will organise three back-to-back solo exhibitions featuring the works of three **Nsukka artists, Ngozi-Omeje Ezema, Eva Obodo and Ozioma Onuzulike**, in an exhibition series titled *The New Nsukka School*. Nsukka artists are no strangers to the contemporary art space and have critically engaged both its visual and theoretical fields. As a descriptive label, Nsukka artists not only conjures up an image that romanticizes the creative identity of artists who trained at the Fine and Applied Arts Department of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, it also references a stylistic patrimony whose formal and aesthetic codes draw from a creative ideology that is conceptually idealized, experimentally driven and intellectually grounded.

Nsukka artists leverage this ideology in creating modern and contemporary art forms through the exploration of ideas, materials and forms sourced from the environment. The stylistic interventions engendered by the *uli* revivalist art movement, which emerged in the Nsukka art department in the 1970s, bear eloquent testimonies to the potency of the Nsukka art ideology. The institutional practice of transforming traditional *uli* art into a modernist artistic language catalysed the emergence of the Nsukka art school, an artistic phenomenon whose creative exceptionalism and triumphalism have significantly impacted on contemporary art practice nationally, continentally and globally. The core thesis of Nsukka school art centres on the use of indigenous knowledge to interrogate local and global spheres of art practice.

Beyond the intimate encounter with *uli* idiom, Nsukka school art is also known for a stylistic regime that critically engages with the materiality and metaphoric value of both natural and man-made objects. The art of El Anatsui, one of the leading figures of the Nsukka art school and Africa's most celebrated artist, serves as both fount and factor in appraising this creative posturing in the works of Nsukka artists. Historically, stylistic trends in Nsukka school art have largely been driven by the enriching influence of art teachers whose pedagogical footprints and artistic sensibilities have had a crystallizing effect on the Nsukka art school's stylistic identity. El Anatsui is unarguably one of the most celebrated and most influential artist to have taught in the Nsukka art department. His unconventional approach to art teaching as well as his highly experimental studio practice has influenced the art careers of many Nsukka artists. For instance, the technical processes employed by Anatsui in the production of his wood panel works of the late 1980s, and his more recent bottle top sculptural installations, find resounding echoes in the studio programmes

of many Nsukka artists. Of particular interest is the repetitive use of a modular unit of a chosen material in ways that pay homage to *Igwe bu Ike* spirit, the Igbo philosophical thought that extols the strength of the collective. Works produced with this technique project a radical aesthetics that evocatively communicates the intense, but yet effectual conversations between ideas, materials and processes.

Igwe bu ike philosophy provides the conceptual and technical chords which stylistically binds the works of the three artists in this exhibition series. Although sharing commonalities in terms of technical approaches and use of commonplace materials, the formal language employed by the artists differs and highlights how each artist engages the potentialities and materiality of their chosen medium/material. The two ceramists, Ngozi-Omeje Ezema and Ozioma Onuzulike, have consistently challenged conventional notions of ceramics art. Their works are charged with formal and aesthetic energies that locate ceramics art within the mainstream art historical and critical circuit. Their violation of the traditional use of clay enables the development of new contexts and imageries that not only reaffirms the potentialities of clay as a highly evocative medium, but also reinforces its essentializing role as a filtering medium in the deconstruction and reconstruction of life experiences. The sculptor, Eva Obodo, has mastered a formal language that profoundly harnesses the expressivity of both the material and metaphoric properties of charcoal textiles and jute fibre. His works which creatively navigate boundaries between art genres reflect the harmonious convocation of textiles, ceramics, painting and sculptural elements. The visual power of Obodo's works elevates our experiences and understanding of the sculpture genre. Thematically, the art of these three Nsukka artists derive a significant part of its elocutionary power from the symbolic deployment of technical processes as active carriers of the narrative weight of embedded messages. In this context, actions like piercing, tying, stringing, suspending, perforating, cutting, firing, dyeing and roasting among others, are used as metaphors that explicate the temporariness, permanence and liminality of the human condition.

The New Nsukka School exhibition series aims to revalidate the criticality of Nsukka school art in the global art space. The exhibitions will provide a contextualized window through which the conceptual, intellectual and experimental energies that frame the school can be stylistically mapped in the works of three Nsukka artists. By hosting the exhibitions back-to-back, kó aims to maximize the visibility of the Nsukka experience while also providing an intellectual space for engaging the dialectics of contemporary art practice in Nigeria and its connectivity to art dialogues around the world.

Dr. George Odoh is a Senior Lecturer in painting and drawing in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.



From Suspended Vases to Visions of Womanhood: Reflections on Ngozi Omeje's *Leaf Series*

Dr. George Odoh

Like joyful music locked in the sensuous embrace of its stringed sanctuary, Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's recent ceramic art installations evoke imageries of a well orchestrated symphony in which hundreds of suspended terracotta leaves construct the musical notes of its harmonious melodies. In this exhibition, the first of a three-part series featuring the works of three Nsukka artists, Ezema's *Leaf* series highlights her ongoing exploration of the leaf motif as an expressive visual element rich in affective metaphors. For the artist, the leaf motif represents a state of being; a transient element whose materiality symbolically dramatizes rites of passage and its associated conditions of liminality. In her recent works, the material properties of leaves are used as formal and narrative handles to address issues relating to womanhood. In its congregated and suspended state, the leaf motifs act as both the messenger and the message. They not only simulate forms, they also disrupt, define and activate spaces. Ezema's installations can quickly shift from a state of stasis to that of dynamic movement. They also project a radical aesthetic that draws attention to infinite possibilities riding on the wings of experimentation.

Ngozi-Omeje Ezema represents the new generation of contemporary Nigerian ceramists who infuse modernist sensibilities into an age-old traditional art form. Her approach to the clay medium mirrors the footsteps of other Nsukka trained ceramists like Chris Echeta, Ozioma Onuzulike and Caius Onu, whose works radically challenge long established notions that locate ceramics art within the limiting frame of its utilitarian function. Ezema trained as a ceramic artist at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. In 2009, the same year she completed her Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programme in ceramics art, she was offered a teaching appointment at the Nsukka art department. For the past decade, she has combined art teaching with a vibrant studio practice.

Ngozi-Omeje's training at the Nsukka art department strongly impacted on her artistic development. Her exposure to the culture of experimentation and exploration which drive the creative philosophy of the Nsukka art department opened up her mind to the possibilities of creating art using unconventional methods and commonplace materials. Also, her pedagogical experiences with seasoned ceramists like Ozioma Onuzulike and Vincent Ali, who taught her at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, played key roles in shaping her artistic sensibilities. On a more profound note, Ngozi-Omeje acknowledges the influence of El Anatsui on her art.¹ Anatsui is unarguably one of the most prominent and most influential artist of the Nsukka art school. His art practice has had a proselytizing influence on several generations of artists who trained in the Nsukka art department. Anatsui's occasional visits to Ngozi-Omeje's studio provided invaluable creative stimulus that significantly benefitted her studio processes. For instance, in her installations, we find resounding echoes of the technique employed in El Anatsui's bottle top installations, which entails using multiple units of a material in ways that aim for the "aesthetics of the critical mass."²

Although Ngozi-Omeje has explored unconventional methods that upend traditional use of the clay medium, her suspended ceramic art installations, a compositional strategy which she first explored during her graduate studies, have become her trademark signature style. The art of suspending objects in space has been critically explored by numerous artists. Alexander Calder is considered a pioneer in this field, having begun hanging art as far back as the 1930s. Notable suspended sculpture artists whose works may have inspired Ngozi-Omeje include Jae-Hyo Lee, who composes works of astonishing scale and beauty using rocks suspended with strings, and Sean-GhiBahk, who has extensively worked with charcoal. Omeje has created quite a number of works using the suspension technique. These include *Up and Down* (2009), *Fishers of Men* (2009), *Imagine Jonah* (2009), *Think Tea, Think Cup* (2010), *She Bleeds* (2010), *Life on Strings* (2011), *Placenta* (2014), *Against all Odds* (2015) and *In My Garden there are many Colours II* (2016). In 2018, she undertook her most ambitious installation project so far. The installation comprised a herd of nine elephants which the artist used symbolically to memorialize personal experiences. Eight of the elephants represent the living members of her family. The ninth elephant, separated from the group but still watching over them,

alludes to her departed father, whose accomplishments, personal traits and titular name find figurative endorsement in the attributes of an elephant.

In Ngozi Omeje's *Leaf* series, the leaf motif — which the artist used as a modular design element in her elephant project — is again deployed as a critical tool for advancing the formal, aesthetic and thematic geographies of her art. In the artist's words:

“The leaf represents aspects of tenderness in women that is often taken for granted. The leaf is equally suggestive of the long suffering that women undergo in relationships. When you look at the colour of the leaves in my work, they give the impression that the leaves have dried yet they still retain their beauty.”³

With respect to the varied tones of the terracotta leaves which comprises off white, light brown reddish brown and dark brown tones, the artist explains that the tones are achieved by firing the clay forms at different temperatures. Very dark tones are produced by covering the bisque fired clay forms with sawdust and setting it on fire. The stringing process is carried out in a methodical manner. Using multiple strands of suspended fish line, hundreds of perforated leaf motifs are strung together at predetermined levels and positions to simulate vases of different shapes and sizes. In contemplating her suspended vases, our experience and understanding of what a vase is and the function it performs, are radically subverted. Her works are structurally dynamic. At the slightest disturbance, the suspended vases can shape shift and are also capable of producing musical sounds as the terracotta leaf forms make contact with each other.

In addition to her installations that allow for three-dimensional viewing, Ngozi-Omeje also explores works that could be mounted on the wall. This adds a new dimension to her compositional structuring and expands the contexts in which her works could be viewed and experienced. Beyond its aesthetics, Ngozi-Omeje's suspended vases are infused with a social vision that interrogates the gendered landscape of her cultural environment. The burdens that women bear in relationships, their physical attributes — as well as experiences that define their position in society — are symbolically wrapped around the physical and functional attributes of a vase. In the works *Subjugation, Freedom and*

Extinction, the structure and placement of the smaller vases contained within the larger vases articulates Omeje's visions of womanhood. Ideas relating to motherhood, subjugation, oppression, indifference, conflict, resilience, resistance, togetherness and freedom are framed using a formal language that is as sensuous as it is evocative.

In engaging Ngozi-Omeje's recent body of works, we are made to experience the passion, industry and experimental energy which she invests into her art. We are equally drawn into an environment that reveals in an ennobling manner the seamless and awesomeness of artistic imagination. Borrowing from Sylvester Ogbegie's characterization of Nsukka School art, Ngozi-Omeje's art projects a radical aesthetic that speaks the “language of sublime awe.”⁴

Dr. George Odoh is a Senior Lecturer in painting and drawing in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Notes:

1. In my interaction with Ngozi-Omeje Ezema during a studio visit, she recounted the many roles that El Anatsui played in advancing both the conceptual and experimental components of her art.
2. Ozioma Onuzulike used the term ‘aesthetics of the critical mass’ to describe how Nsukka artists assembled individual pieces of materials that were similar yet varied in forms, colour and texture in ways that initiate a chain of aesthetic experience in viewers.
3. Ngozi-Omeje Ezema gave this explanation regarding her use of the leaf motif during my visit to her studio on January 3, 2021.
4. In his essay, “From Masks to Metal Cloth: Artists of the Nsukka School and the Problems of Ethnicity,” Sylvester Okwuonudu Ogbegie uses the term ‘language of sublime awe’ and ‘radical aesthetics’ as stylistic markers of Nsukka school art. The aesthetic regime of this style reflects dialogic encounters between indigenous knowledge and local/global sites of artistic production.



Stunted, from the *Leaf* series
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
36 x 36 x 78 in. (91 x 91 x 195 cm.)



Subjugation, from the *Leaf* series
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
36 x 36 x 78 in. (91 x 91 x 195 cm.)



Freedom, from the *Leaf* series
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
36 x 36 x 78 in. (91 x 91 x 195 cm.)





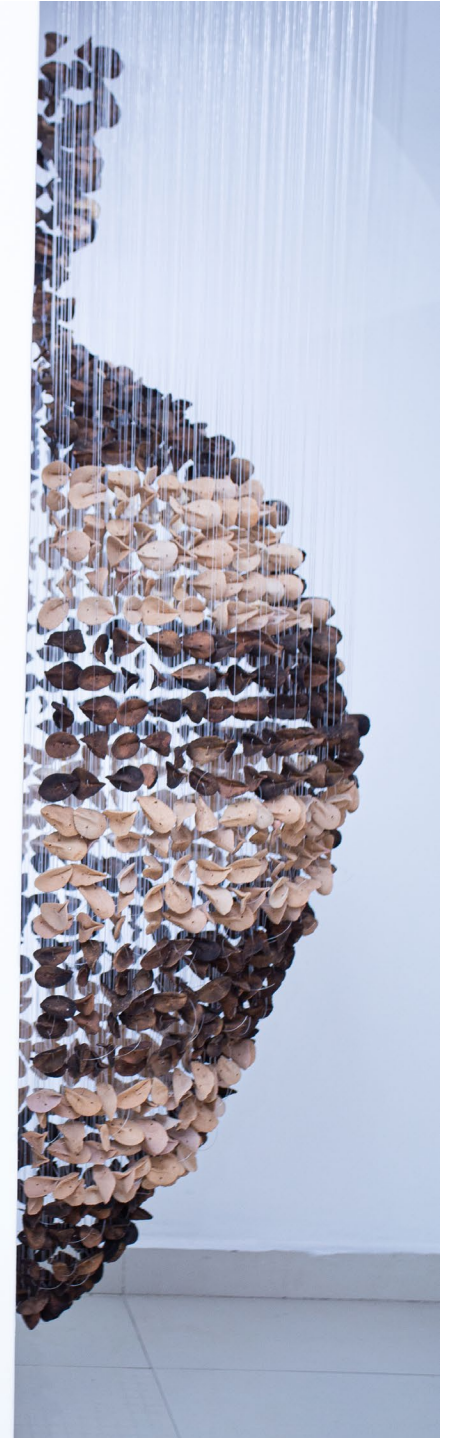
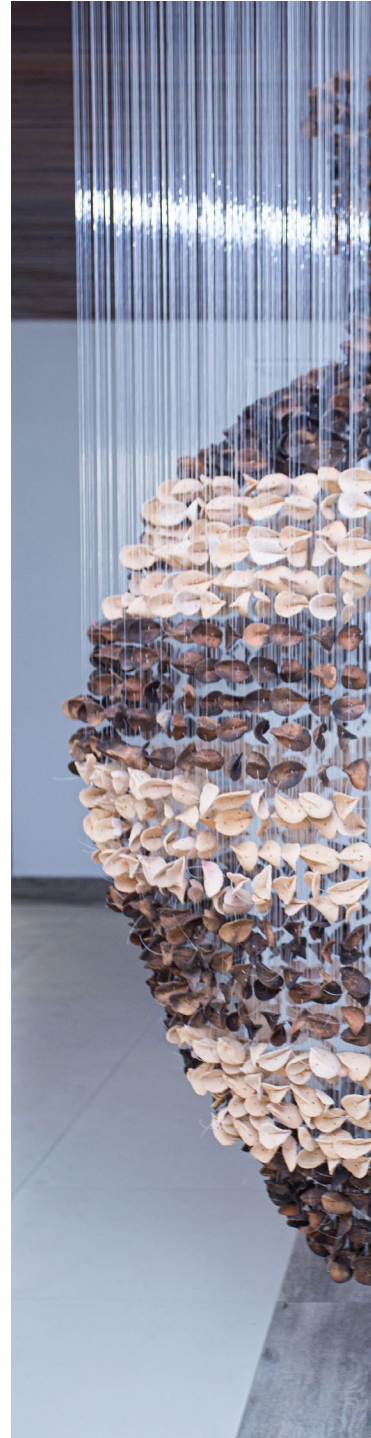
Vase #1
2021
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
36 x 36 x 105 in. (91 x 91 x 262 cm.)



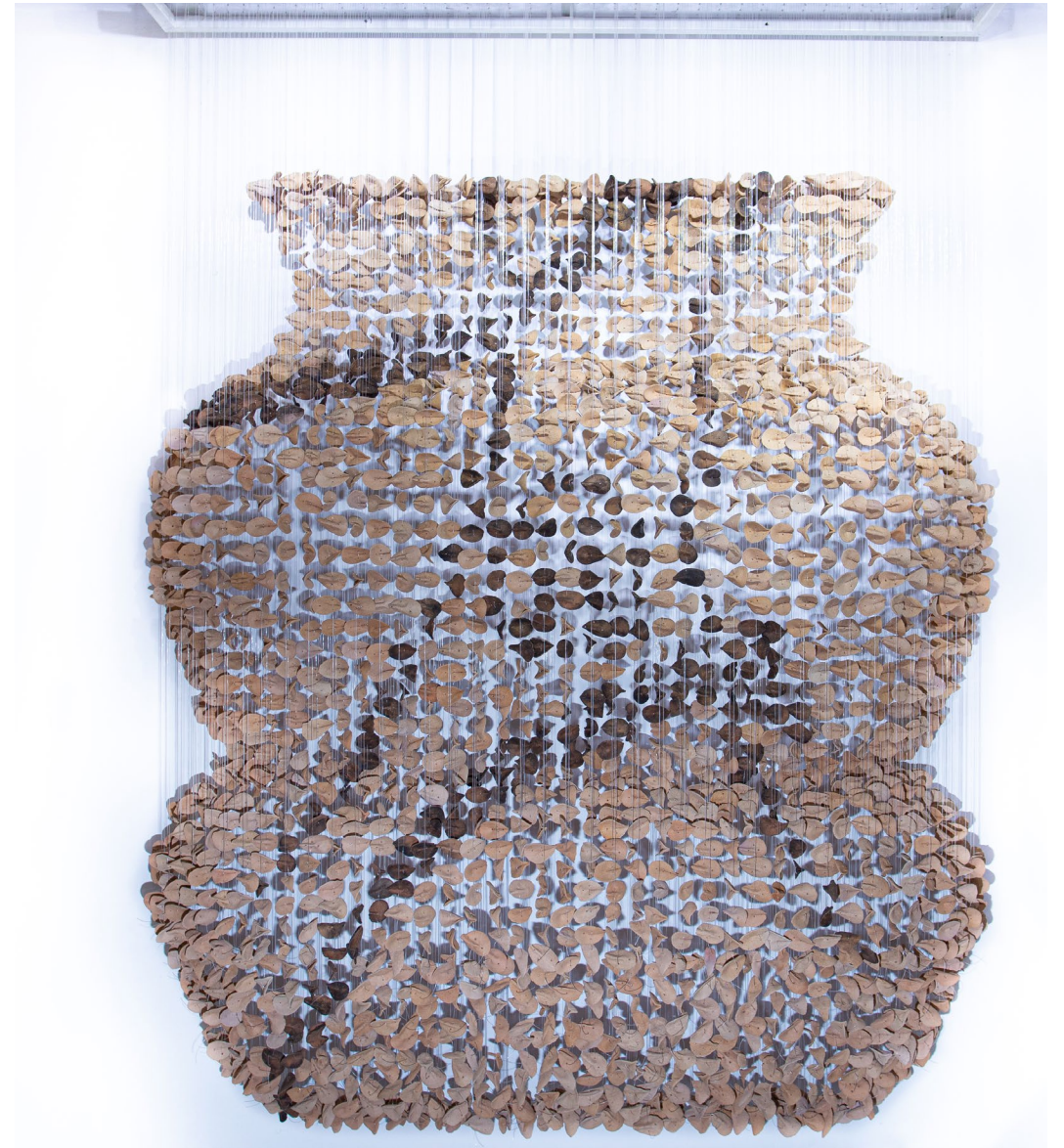


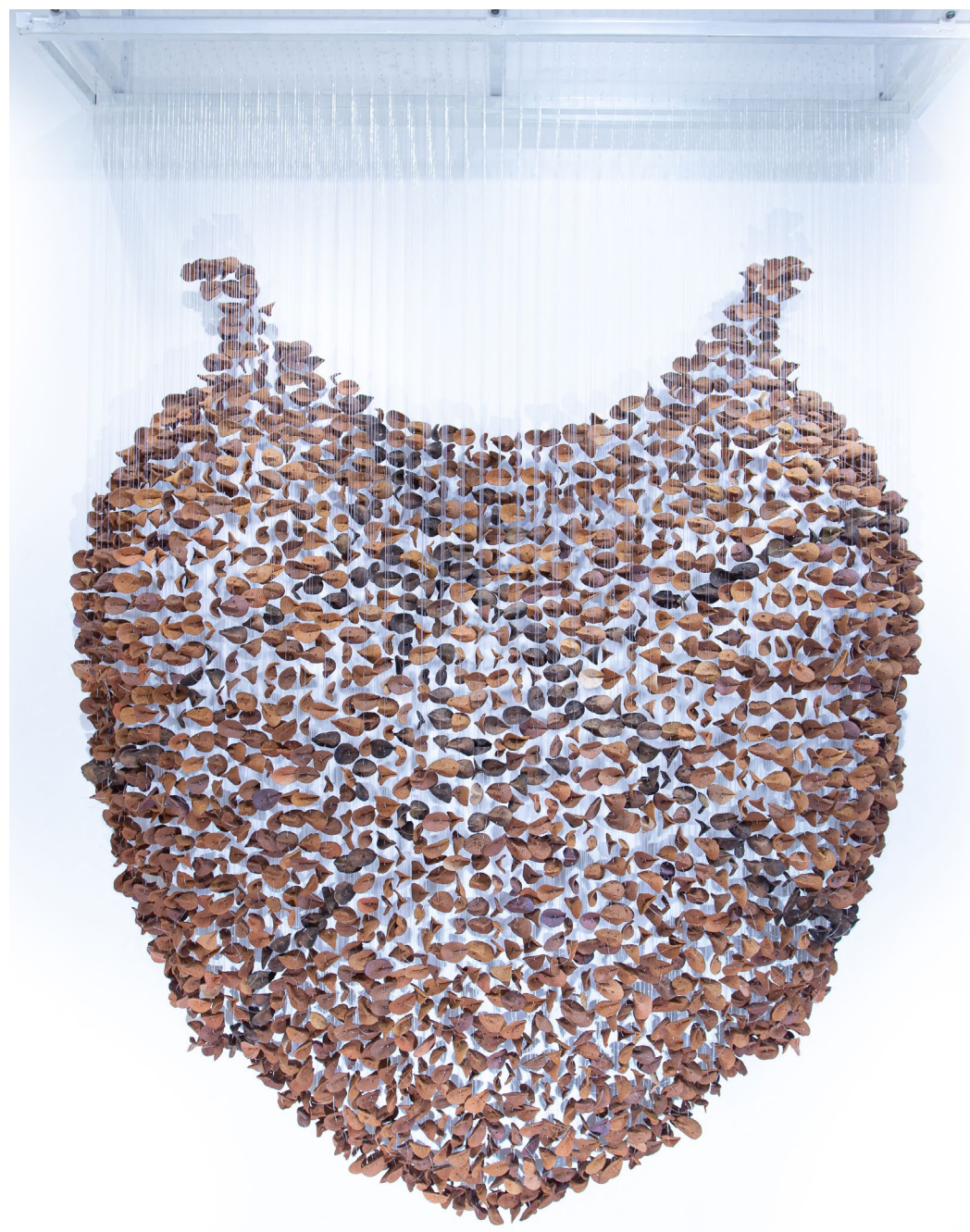
Keeper of light, from the *Leaf* series
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
36 x 36 x 12 in. (91 x 91 x 30 cm.)

Eavesdropper, from the *Leaf* series
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
36 x 36 x 85 in. (91 x 91 x 213 cm.)



Union I, from the *Leaf* series
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
61 x 12 x 85 in. (152 x 30 x 213 cm.)





Union II, from the Leaf series

2020

Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
61 x 12 x 85 in. (152 x 30 x 213 cm.)



Vase #2
2021
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 24 in. (30 x 30 x 61 cm.)



Vase #3
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 24 in. (30 x 30 x 61 cm.)



Vase #4
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 24 in. (30 x 30 x 61 cm.)



Vase #5
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 30 in. (30 x 30 x 76 cm.)



Vase #6
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 30 in. (30 x 30 x 76 cm.)



Vase #7
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 30 in. (30 x 30 x 76 cm.)



Vase #8
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 36 in. (30 x 30 x 91 cm.)



Vase #9
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 30 in. (30 x 30 x 76 cm.)



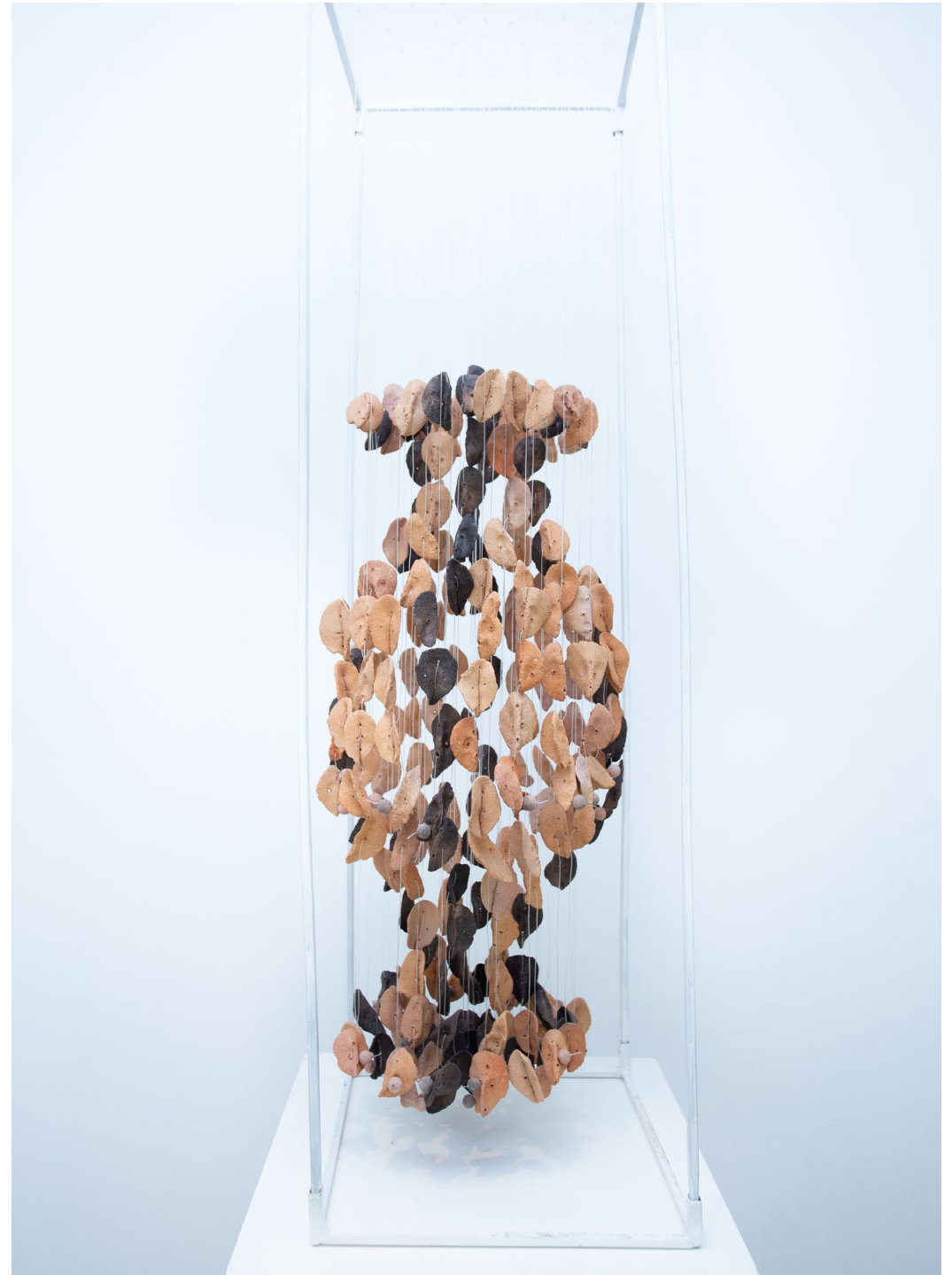
Vase #10
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 42.4 in. (30 x 30 x 106 cm.)



Vase #11
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 42.4 in. (30 x 30 x 106 cm.)



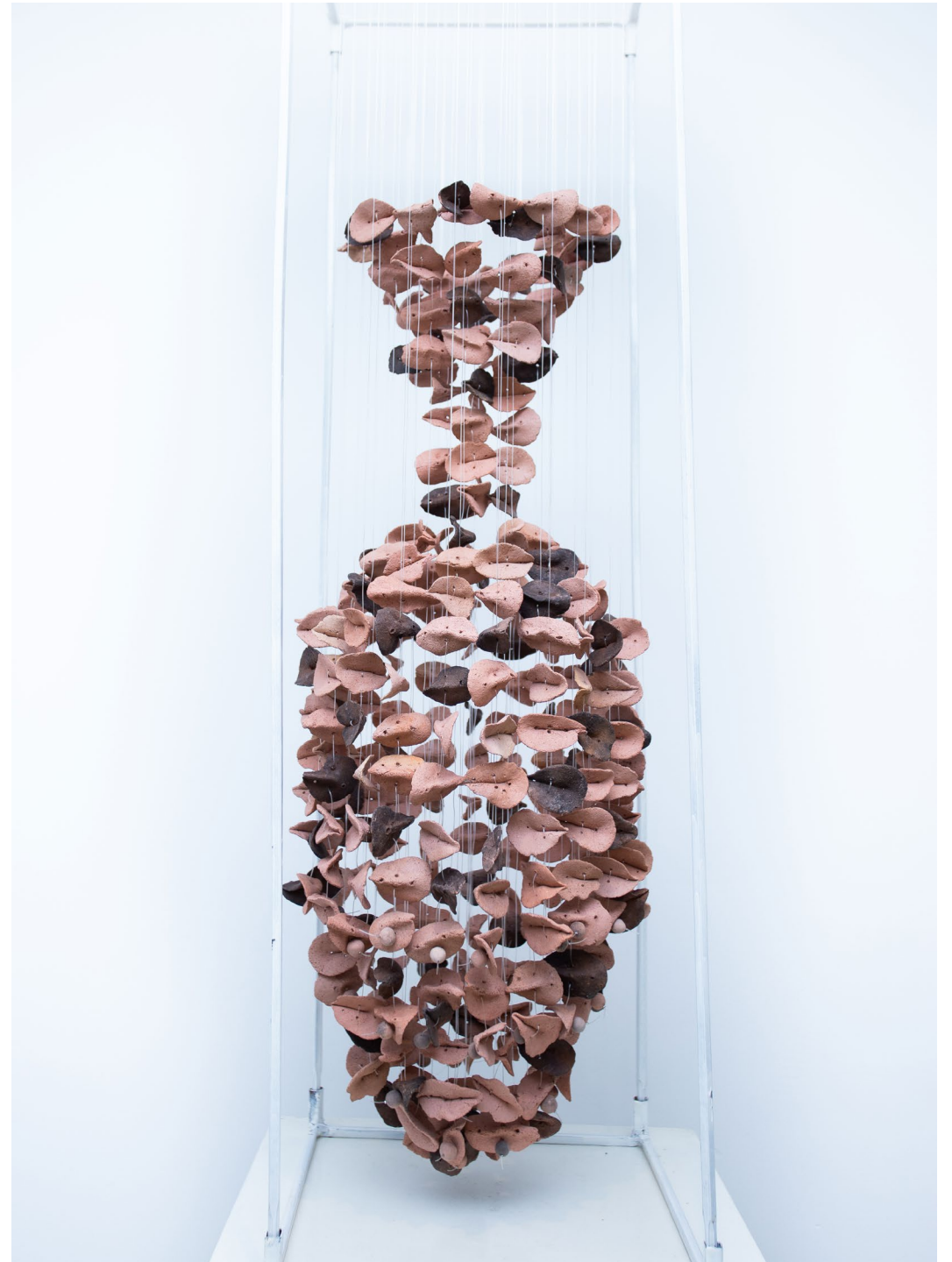
Vase #12
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 42.4 in. (30 x 30 x 106 cm.)



Vase #13
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 42.4 in. (30 x 30 x 106 cm.)



Vase #14
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 42.4 in. (30 x 30 x 106 cm.)



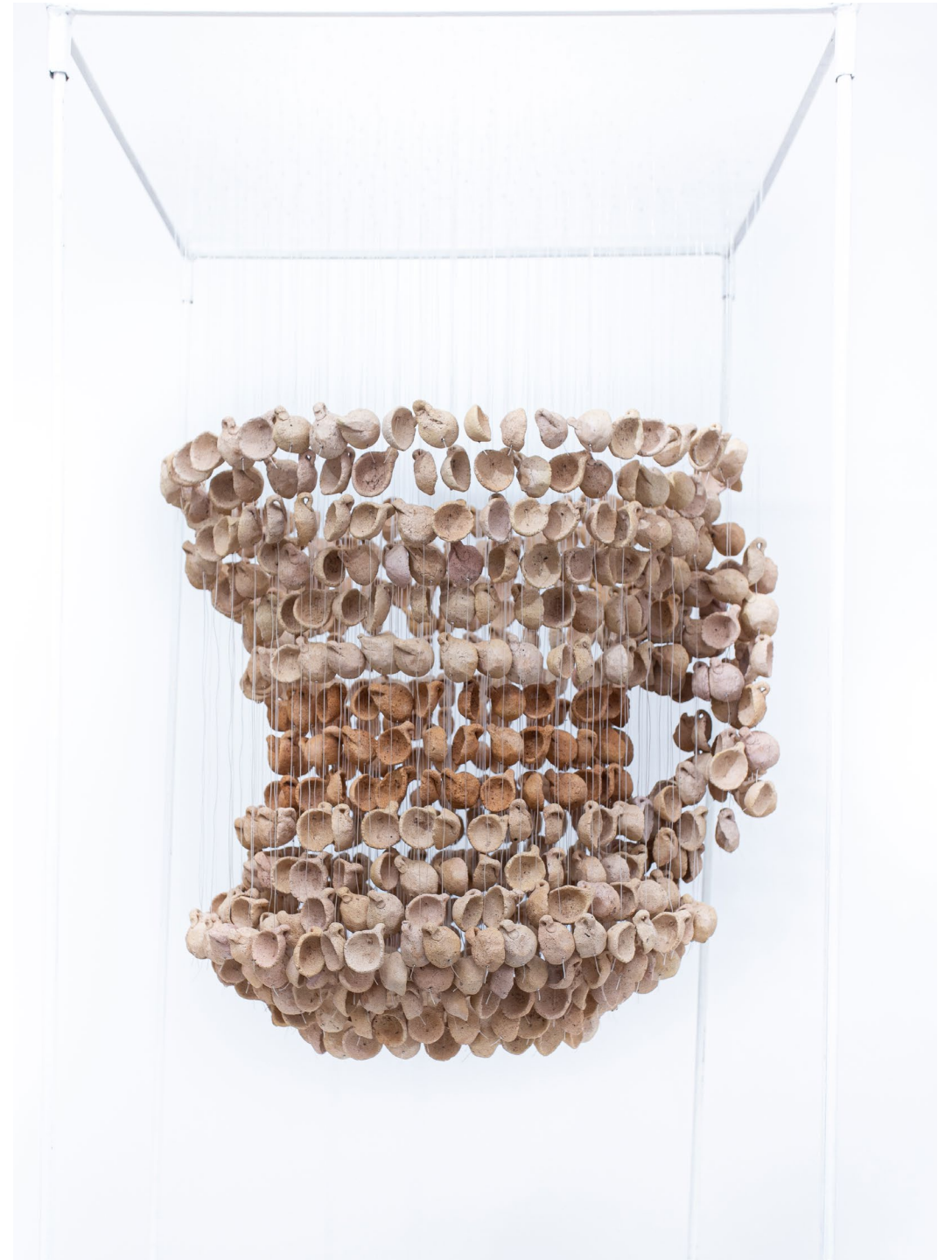
Vase #15
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
12 x 12 x 42.4 in. (30 x 30 x 106 cm.)



Vase #16
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
24 x 24 x 49 in. (61 x 61 x 122 cm.)



My Goal
2020
Terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal
24 x 24 x 49 in. (61 x 61 x 122 cm.)





About the Artist

Ngozi-Omeje Ezema received her BA in Fine and Applied Arts from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and an MFA in ceramics from the same institution. She currently serves as a lecturer at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where she teaches ceramics.

Her first solo exhibition, *Connecting Deep*, was held at Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) Lagos in 2018. She also participated in the First International Biennale in Centra China and Le Pinceau De L'Integration in Senegal, during the Dakar Biennale in 2016. She was commissioned for a special project installation at Art X Lagos in 2016. In 2019, she won the High Excellence Award at the Cheongju International Craft Biennale in South Korea.

Ngozi-Omeje Ezema has participated in artist residencies with the Centre for Contemporary Art/ Trianglar Art Trust (Lagos), Goethe-Institut Nigeria (Nsukka), Sevshoon Art Centre (Seattle), Goethe Institute Ghana (Kumasi), and the Trianglar Art Trust (Jos). Her project, *Against All Odds*, won the Outstanding Concept Award of Nigeria's National Art Competition in 2015. In 2014, she was the winner of the Life in My City Art Foundation Prize. Ezema lives and works in Nsukka, Nigeria.



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. Through exhibitions, publications, public programming, and participation in art fairs, kó aims to expand conversations about contemporary art in Africa to a local and global audience.

www.ko-artspace.com

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