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Demola Ogunajo

Area Art

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Acknowledgements

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FRONT COVER: *Area Banner*, 2018, Acrylic on canvas

FRONTISPIECE: *Superboy*, 2014, Acrylic on canvas

BACK COVER: *Helmet from Heaven III*, 2017, Helmet, stickers

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The Duality of Area Art

By Joseph Gergel, Curator

There is always a story to decipher when viewing Demola Ogunajo's paintings. Often, there are multiple narratives interacting simultaneously as different elements of the composition play off one another. A graphic artist, Ogunajo is interested in the signs and symbols of his environment, transforming everyday experiences with a spectacular twist. Ogunajo depicts ordinary scenes with an otherworldly dimension, one of angels, astronauts and superheroes. His paintings are metaphors that examine the philosophical complexities of modern life, often with spiritual, religious or political undertones.

His newest body of work, *Area Art*, has been developed meticulously over the last decade. Ogunajo was influenced by the aesthetics of local sign posters and bumper stickers adorned on trucks, busses, and motorcycles in Nigeria. Among the busy traffic in Nigeria, it is impossible not to notice the colorful embellishments on many vehicles that dot the roadways. In this informal tradition of street culture, drivers curate their own visual message that projects their personal values and tastes. Ogunajo dissects these popular symbols and re-engages them in surreal and fantastical ways.

In *Area Art*, Ogunajo forms a seemingly haphazard selection of symbols —from lions, tigers and birds to clowns, dragons and butterflies. Collectively, they form stories that become signifiers for universal struggles, ones that are biblical in nature. In his canvases, we encounter the mythical battle of good versus evil, alluding to themes of innocence, transcendence and redemption.

In his figurative paintings, Ogunajo often depicts an everyday citizen navigating the urban environment. The symbols around them represent struggles, temptations and vices, as well as divine intervention. In *Superboy* (2014), for example, an impeccably dressed man in a blazer, fedora hat and polished boots walks along the street. Multiple arrow symbols and warning signs allude to his personality and caution along the way. According to the artist, the crown behind him connotes royalty, a lotus is a symbol of enlightenment, and a cheetah is known for speed. In *New Raiment* (2014), a boy is fitted for his clothes at a tailoring shop, comforted by seamstresses that morph into angels. In *Divine Ice Cream Seller* (2013), an unassuming deity rides his bicycle through the market, unbeknownst to passerby. In these ordinary scenes, Ogunajo paints his characters as if they were the primordial Adam or Eve, strolling through the Garden of Eden.

In other works, Ogunajo imagines a supernatural environment, a world in the clouds that floats in non-linear space. In the *Plankton Highway* series, there are amorphous machines

that could represent spaceships from another planet. Some planes look as if they are commercial aircrafts or military fighter jets while some resemble toy paper airplanes. The crafts carry the reoccurring sticker-shapes as if they were national flags or corporate logos. Any sense of a cohesive narrative is interrupted by disparate elements such as a crawling baby, a pink lion and a floating jellyfish. Within this dystopian vision of the future where perhaps the machines are now in charge, a star-shaped figure smiles with its tongue out, as if mocking the scene of chaos below.

While some of Ogunajo's stories are lighthearted in tone, others reflect more negatively on the struggles of contemporary life. In *Decapitation* (2017), a triple-headed serpent wraps itself around a beheaded torso, surrounded by tigers, crabs, and winged beasts. In *Holy Grail of Vices* (2017), a hybrid centaur holds center stage around "Get Rich Quick" slogans that promise a shortcut to fortune. Here, Ogunajo's critique becomes more political in tone, pointing to the struggles of socio-economic inequality and greed.

Ogunajo counters these heavy philosophical dilemmas with humor, often adapting a playful spin that suggests that love might perhaps always win. In *Individual Love* (2019), a solemn bird perches alone, with a hand-written phrase stating "Individual Love First". Below, a flock of birds carry the message "Then Collective Love is Bliss". Similarly, in *Tune in and turn out* (2017), a group of arrows pointing one direction is contrasted with a single non-conforming arrow. Through these metaphors, Demola provides clues to suggest a path to individual enlightenment. Whether depicting hybrid assemblages of objects or isolating the symbols themselves onto canvases, his work exudes the quirky nature of its source materials.

Outside of painting, *Area Art* also features found objects, including helmets and motorcycle windshields, that are intricately designed with stickers. The objects become almost shrine-like, as if they were alters of popular culture. Ogunajo has also translated his vision for *Area Art* with a video installation of a gyrating figure in motion. Played on a loop, this brief moment becomes mesmerising, as if ceremonial.

Ogunajo's work has always taken references from cartoons, advertisements and the trends of mass culture. After graduating from Obafemi Awolowo University in 1994, he became known for his graphic approach to art production. It is notable that Ogunajo has worked extensively as a graphic designer. He illustrated for *Glendora Review - An African Quarterly Journal for the Arts*, in addition to numerous album covers and books. This work is a continuation of his long term project, *Animystic City*, which explores the connection between spirituality and urban space. Demola Ogunajo elevates our common encounters, revealing that we might find life's fundamental questions (and answers) in the visual culture around us.

Area Art as Consciousness

By Medina Dugger, Curator

Demola Ogunajo's paintings were among the first I encountered upon arriving to the Lagos art scene in 2011, and they immediately evoked feelings of intrigue, nostalgia and tenderness. Demola's work speaks to identity, the human condition, the exploration of existence and the universality of divinity. This exploration encompasses both external and internal landscapes. The external landscapes feature scenes from Nigerian society and street life, as well as more abstract, ambiguous backdrops. The internal landscapes include aspects of the human-self including: consciousness, the soul, the ego, the shadow-self and the divine-self.

Upon an initial glance, one may categorise Demola's work as a meticulous, painterly illustration: expressive and semi-realistic with elements of drama or cartoon-like humour, reminiscent of the type of animation that appeals to both adults and children. As viewers explore the deeper layers of his paintings however, they may recognise themes highlighting deep and profound concepts including heightened consciousness, ascension, divinity and enlightenment - expressed through symbols, archetypes, paradoxes, figures and text which draw them further into Demola's world.

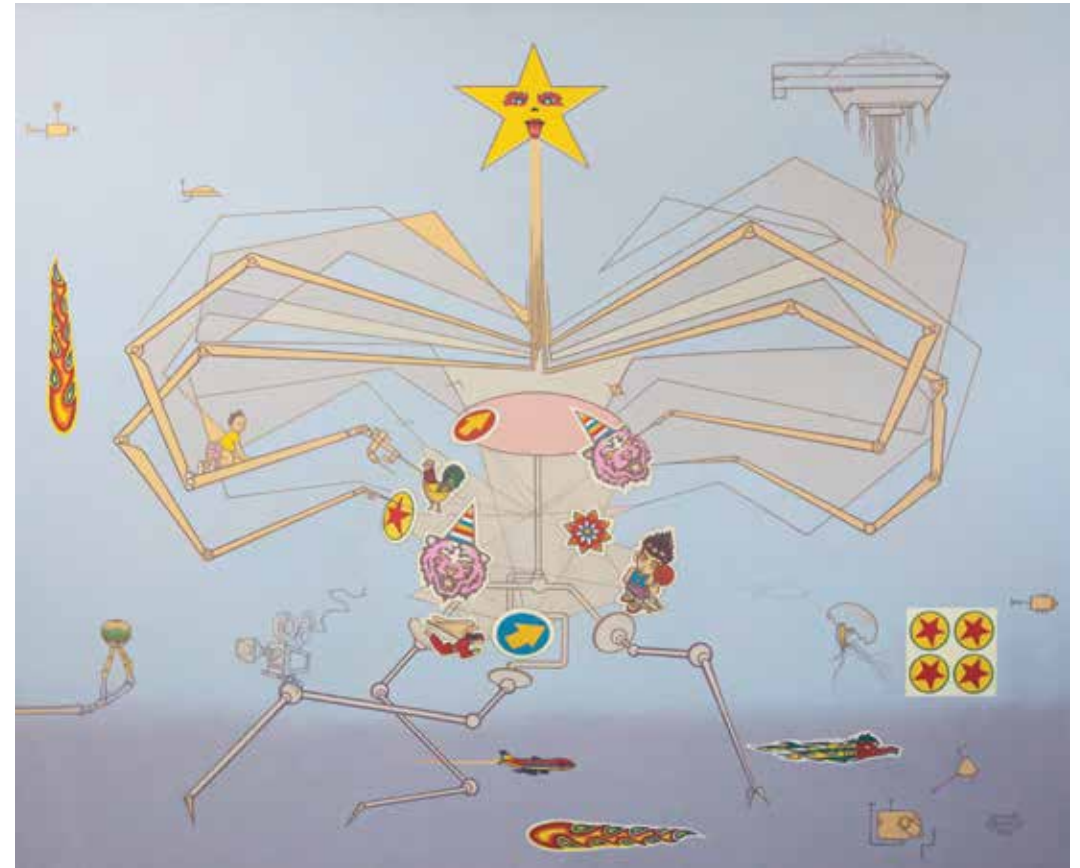
These themes are a direct reflection of Demola's own psyche and spiritual experiences, which he shares are inspired by subjects such as: Christ and collective consciousness, human nature, dimensions of space and time, quantum theory, synchronicities, cosmology, Stephen Hawking, cartoons, cultural traditions, street culture and his own inward journey. Demola has the ability to both shock and entice the viewer into remembering their innate divinity, while offering a recollection of the purity of our true Selves over the conditioned self. He invokes depictions of innocence and childhood, reminding the audience that this sensibility may be accessed at any time.

In *Area Art*, Demola makes reference to the term "area boy" used to describe street gangs in Lagos. He poetically reassembles the vibrancy of street culture onto canvas, elevating the ordinary to the extraordinary. This he does while honoring the artistic merit of the original and democratising the traditionally held perception of what constitutes an art space. In *Area Art*, his compositions are largely inspired by visuals displayed throughout the city, viewed on spray-painted cement walls, bumper stickers and through "traffic wisdom" painted sensationally across buses, kekes and sign boards with messages such as: "No peace for the wicked", "Sea never dry" and "The rich also cry". These maxims represent more than anecdotal adages, they reveal a higher consciousness and higher

culture among everyday people in everyday places and exist as a visual elaboration on traditional Nigerian proverbs. Demola recreates this higher "street consciousness" by lyrically, and sometimes dramatically, composing scenes inspired by local culture, style and his imagination, in order to express a shared humanity and divinity despite social, cultural, religious and philosophical divisions. Demola's perfectionist lines align with the respect and devotion he upholds to the exacting laws of the universe. His choice of color is just as intentional and contributes to his desire to convey a state of feeling and being over analytical seeing.

Burkina Faso Scholar and Shaman Malidoma Patrice Somé names the artist "the pulse of the community". Somé claims the connection between the artist as a sacred healer and the community is undeniable and that it says something about the health of the community. Demola's work is vulnerable, honest and undeniably true to himself. It also exists as a mirror - or pulse - reflecting truths on ground in his community and ultimately speaks to the frequency and dedication to enlightenment he upholds, understanding his role in the evolution of the human-self, the communal body and wider collective consciousness.

Demola Ogunajo
Plankton Highway I
Acrylic on canvas
2016
150 x 121 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Plankton Highway III
Acrylic on canvas
2017
150 x 121 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Bling
Acrylic on canvas
2015
122 x 153 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Nice guy
Acrylic on canvas
2015
75 x 101 cm



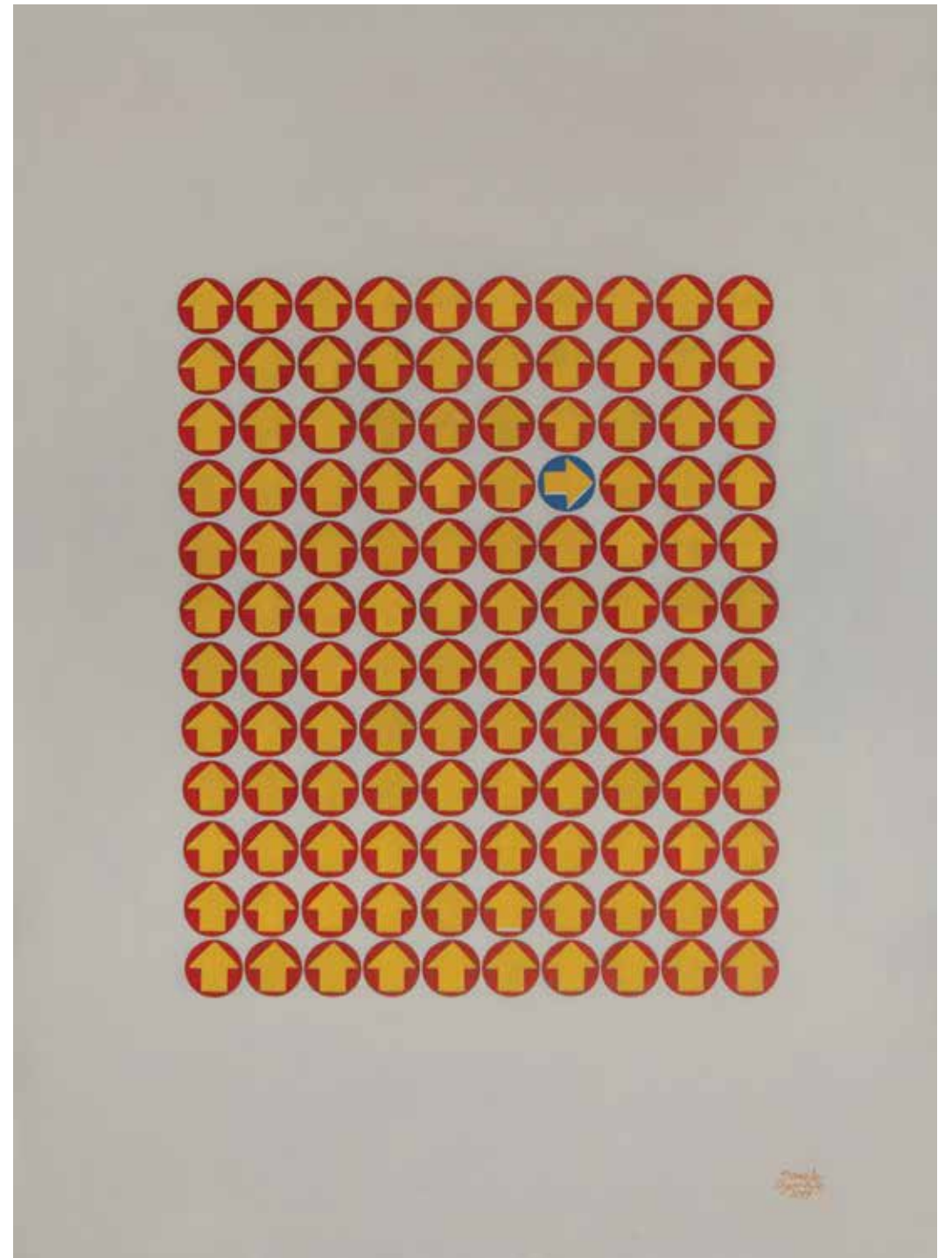
Demola Ogunajo
Individual love
Acrylic on canvas
2019
75 x 101 cm



Demola Ogunajo
I love me
Acrylic on canvas
2015
75 x 101 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Tune and turn out
Acrylic on canvas
2017
75 x 101 cm

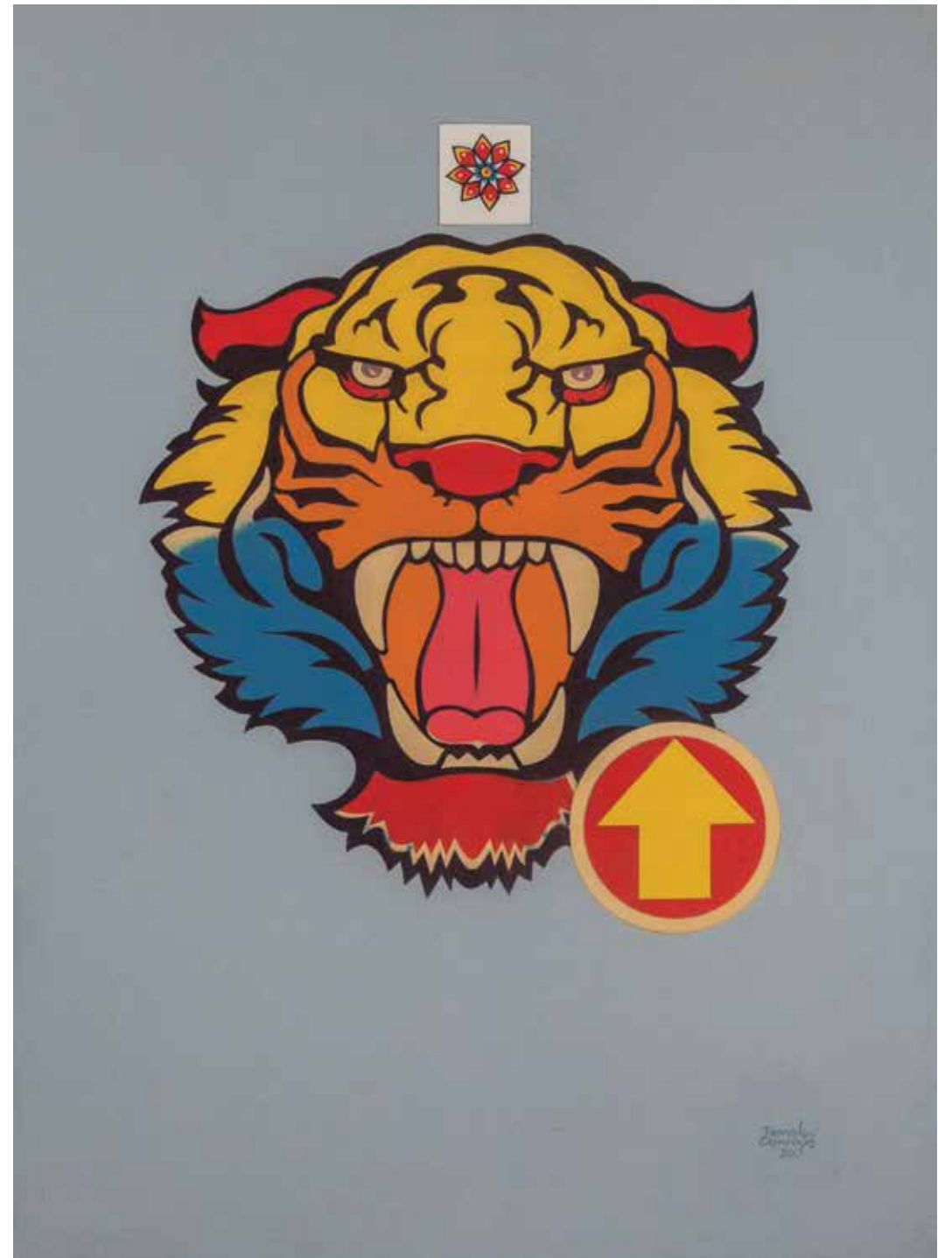




Demola Ogunajo
Pepper
Acrylic on canvas
2019
75 x 101 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Roar
Acrylic on canvas
2017
75 x 101 cm



Demola Ogunajo
So Juicy Sweet
Acrylic on canvas
2019
75 x 101 cm





Demola Ogunajo
Green Tiger Canceled
Acrylic on canvas
2015
75 x 102 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Decapitation
Acrylic on canvas
2017
150 x 121 cm





Demola Ogunajo
Holy Grail of Vices
Acrylic on canvas
2017
174 x 150 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Area Banner
Acrylic on canvas
2018
122 x 152 cm



Styl-nalysis: Demola Ogunajo's Area Banner

By Sabo Kpade

The amalgamation of Jesus and Superman in Demola Ogunajo's *Area Banner* (2018) is a style of portraiture that recalls the Christ Pantokrator, a church decoration with Greco-Roman origins that is said to trace back to statues of Zeus. What was at first imperial imagery of a Greek deity has been proliferated for centuries as the orthodox imagery of the Christian deity.

In *Area Banner* (2018), the all powerful sun, the source of light and life to the earth and our known galaxy, is called upon as a distinction of sanctity. The face of the central figure is bathed in this sunlight, a cadmium yellow which selectively casts down on the figure's matted hair, on the edges of the face, along the joint where the neck meets the top-shoulder and on the patches of skin around the collar bone. Curiously, this cadmium yellow light continues into the folds of the figure's cape, rather than over the red-coloured extension on the figure's costume. On account of its circular shape and bright colour, the sun on the figure's head is centralised in the spatial configuration in *Area Banner*.

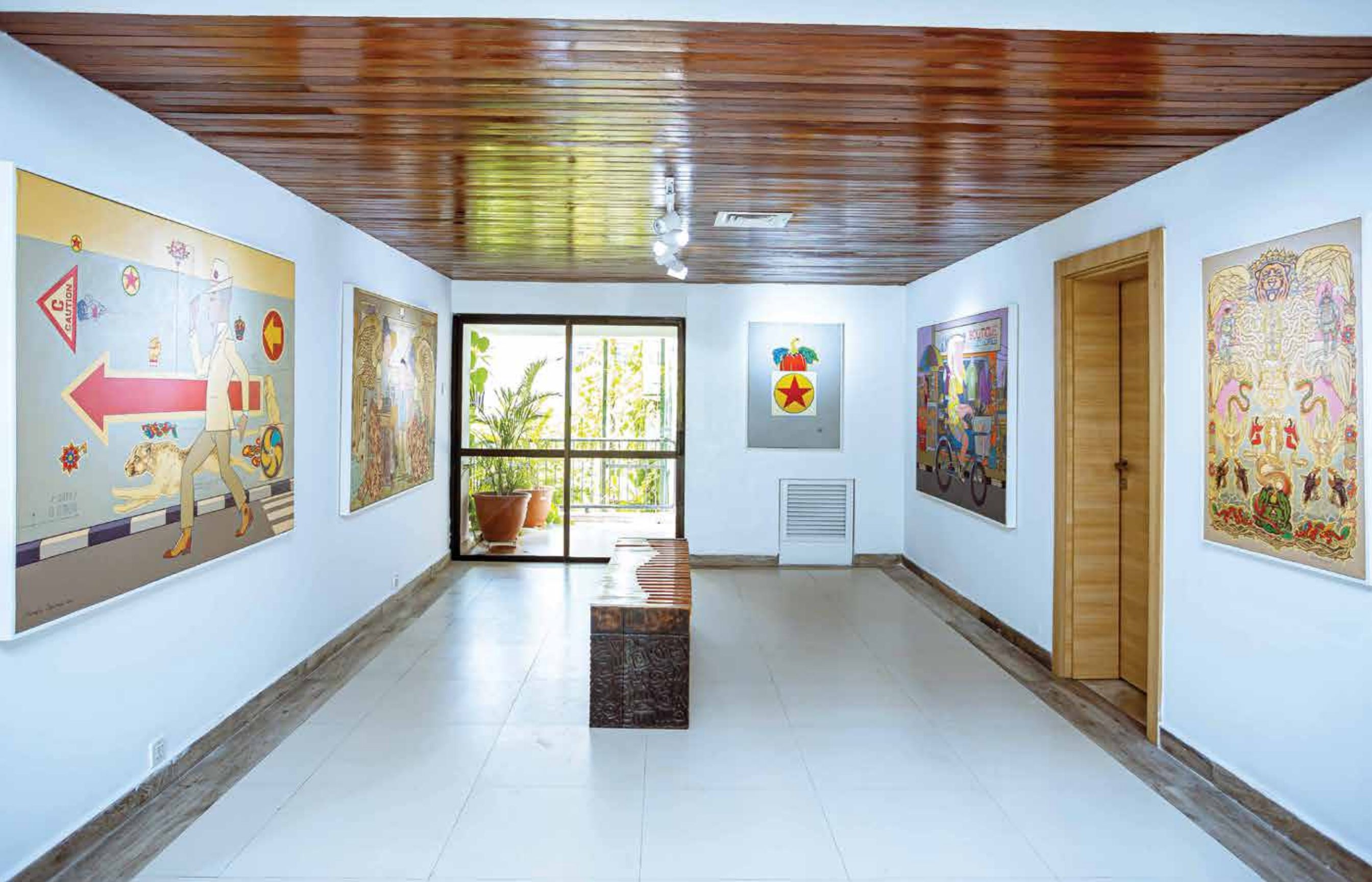
There is a symmetrical line that cuts across the middle of *Area Banner* from the TV set on the topmost end, through the index finger in the middle of the painting and down the leopard head at the bottom-end. The heart-bulb is a wash of yellow and red which gives it the vitality of a beating organ. Yellow spikes of light of varying length jut out of every side of the heart and right on top is a flame. Pointing directly at the middle of the heart-bulb is the index finger on the figure's right hand. It is a simple and effective way to direct the eye of the viewer to what is most significant in *Area Banner*, which is the symbol of the immaculate heart.

If in biology the heart is a central circulatory system of the body, this function is suggested in *Area Banner* whose circular constellation of images is disparate and exotised. They look like reconstitutions of a fabled kingdom whose host of characters include winged lions, arrow-tongued dragons, growling tigers, birds of varicolored plumage, cherubic clowns and hovering angels. The part of the figure's face which is not brightened in cadmium yellow is awashed in blush-pink which resembles pale taupe, depending on the quality of light to which the painting is exposed. For this reason, easy assignations of race and colour to the figure fails. The ambiguity is intentional and brilliantly so. The figure's eyelashes are depicted as a scalene triangle perhaps, based on its three near-equal sizes.

On one end of the triangle which is closest to the forehead is a straight, vertical line which progresses down the figure's face and in between the eyes, stopping just below the

middle of the face. This vertical line runs parallel to the lines on both sides of the figure's face which forms the outer frame of his head. The hair on the figure's head is permed and pressed down into a dome-shape. The oval curvature of this dome smoothly transitions, on both sides of the figure's head, into vertical lines which form three parallel lines with the middle line, and is used to designate what would otherwise be the ridges of a nose. These three vertical lines recall the "three parallel lines theorem" in geometry which is used to define equal proportions introduced by transversal lines. While no transversal lines (whether of light or colour) cut across the figure's face, the physical emergence of the trio draws easy allusions to the centrality of geometry in *Area Banner*.

The term "Area Art" is a play on "Pop Art", the art movement which originated in the US and the UK in the mid twentieth century. It is defined by the playful adoption of mass signage from contemporary advertising, comic books and consumerist obsession partly as a rejection of traditional art values, such as historical painting in favour of the mundanity of popular culture. The word "area" in Nigerian street parlance is used to describe working class communities and the term "Area Art" refers to the mass artistic production that emerges in public spaces (on shops, buses, billboards etc). Demola Ogunajo is well versed in the inventive adoption of area art through technical, formal and abstract modalities into what could be called "gallery art". He deploys in his paintings the visual vocabulary (maxims, caricature, garish colours, religious iconography, etc) of such populist images and objects into new forms of knowledge production.



Demola Ogunajo
Superboy
Acrylic on canvas
2014
178 x 120 cm





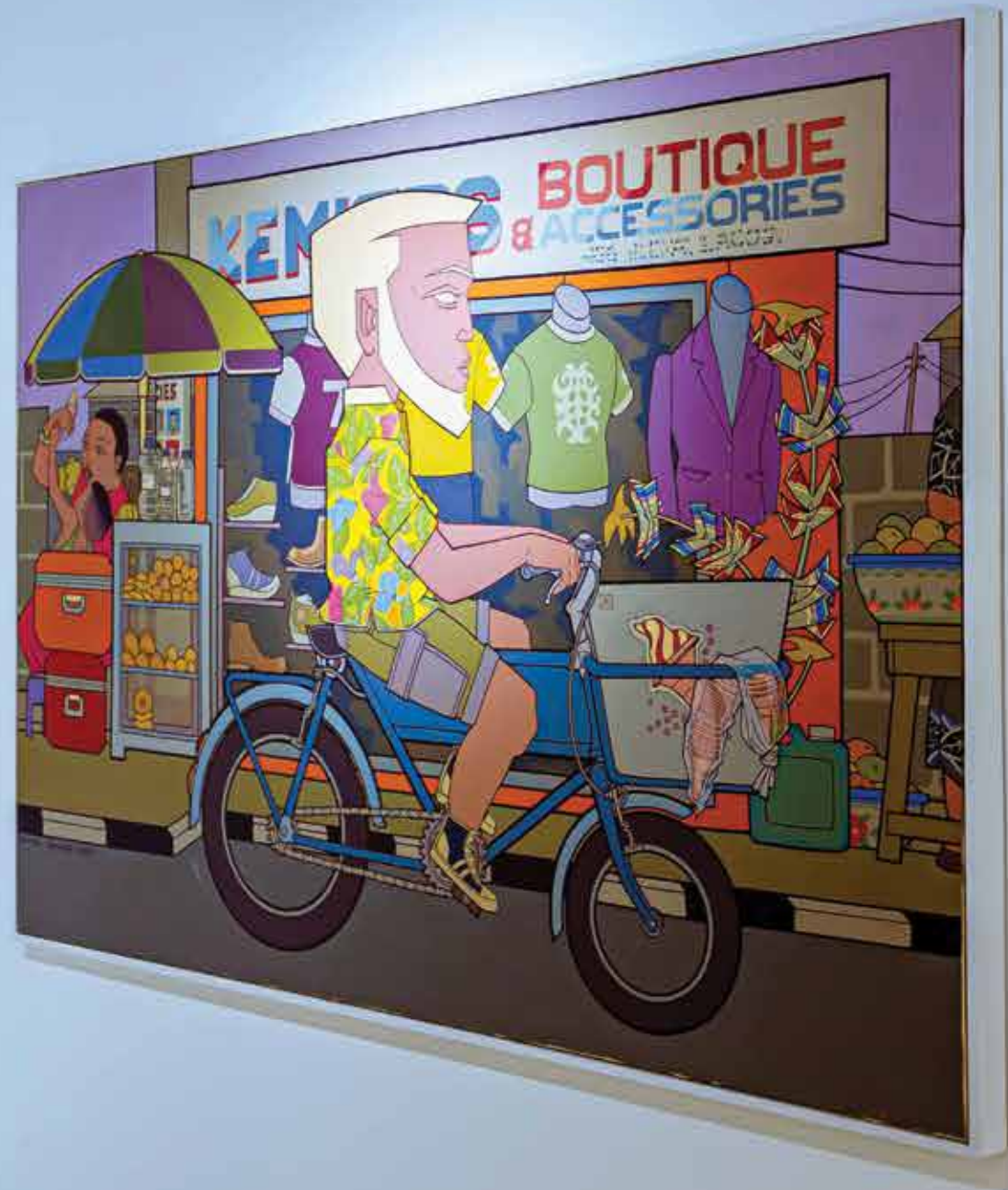
Demola Ogunajo
New Raiment
Acrylic on canvas
2014
181 x 121 cm

Demola Ogunajo
Ise Oluwa Ni
Acrylic on canvas
2009
182 x 122 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Divine Ice Cream Seller
Acrylic on canvas
2013
181 x 123 cm

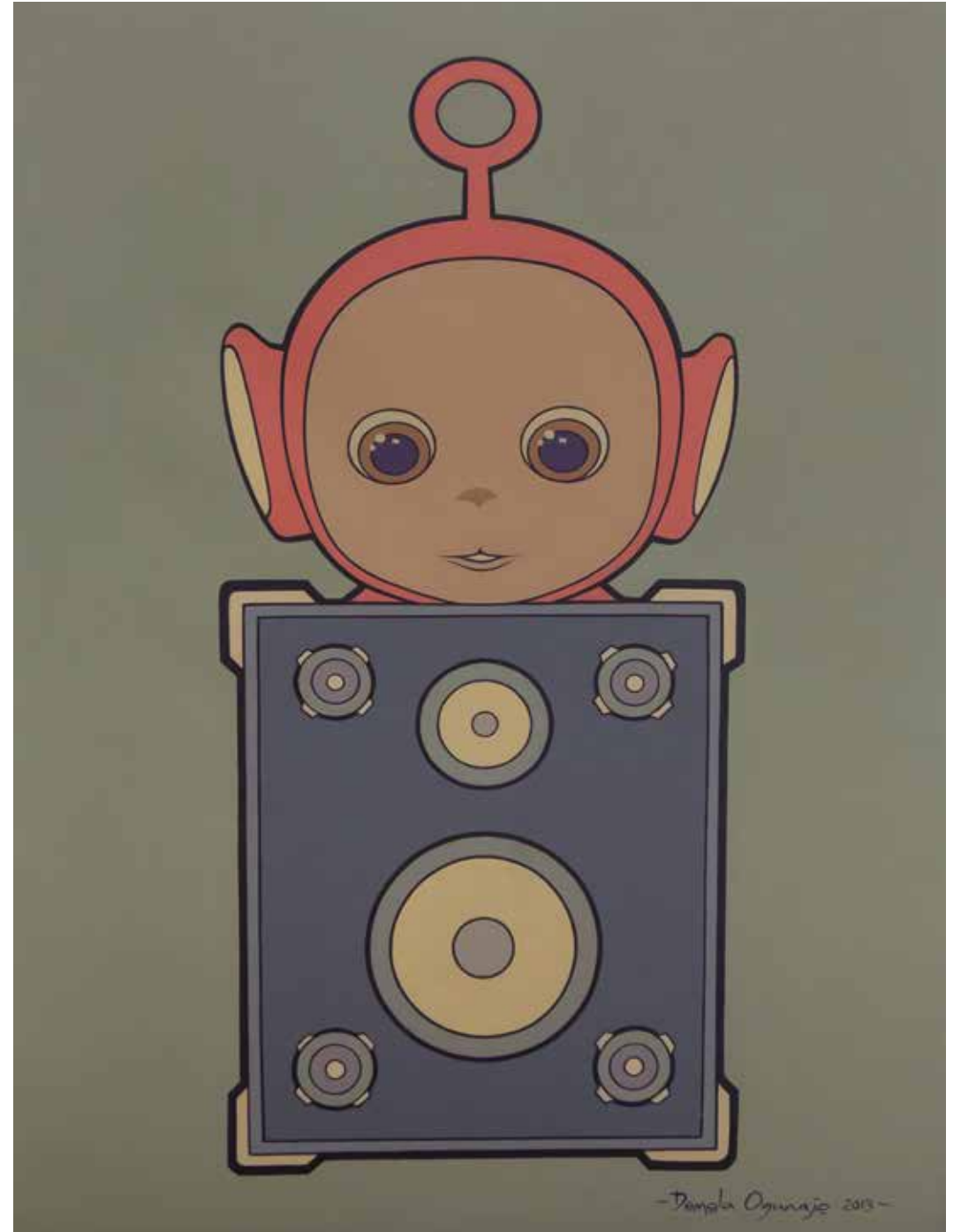






Demola Ogunajo
 Comot 4 Road and Chop Assembly
 Acrylic on canvas
 2017
 75 x 101 cm

Demola Ogunajo
Merriment I
Acrylic on canvas
2013
77 x 102 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Merriment II
Acrylic on canvas
2013
77 x 102 cm





Demola Ogunajo
Helmets from heaven I
Helmet, stickers
2017
35 x 25 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Helmets from heaven II
Helmet, stickers
2017
35 x 25 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Helmets from heaven III
Helmet, stickers
2017
35 x 25 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Shield series I
Motorcycle windshield, stickers
2017
48 x 47 cm



Demola Ogunajo
Shield series II
Motorcycle windshield, stickers
2017
62 x 50 cm



Artist Statement: The Idea of Area Art

The idea of this exhibition is based on the structural and aesthetic modalities which determine the aura of a geography. In this exhibition, I attempt to showcase the psycho-physical ambience of my clime.

However, to make the idea of *Area Art* more explicit, it is pertinent to breakdown its structural modality. Within this structural framework is the self-organizing system of a society, the collective unconscious (self) and collective consciousness (ego-collective or soul) of a city, country or state. These two realms exist as one occupies the centre of the momentum of life, the collective unconscious being the mother to her baby-collective consciousness.

Still in this progression, I take on collective consciousness, what can be termed as the tradition of a culture (i.e the canon or the establishment). At its best, it is a veritable instrument of governance. But on the downside, this feature of a society puts fixation on the flux of life to make itself comfortable (for self gain). It comes with an appearance of order, but often its rigidity becomes a machinery for stagnation that fosters **herd-mentality** in opposition to individualism. Today, its 'shadow' aspect tends to overtake its positivity leaving it in decay. It is the '**chop machinery**' of the greedy. We call it corruption.

However, the *collective unconscious*, coined by CG Jung, just like the *Tao* of Lao Tzu, is the active, self-regulating substrate from which tradition derives its sustenance. It is nature's **womb**. It comes with an imprint, the template of primal order in evolutionary progression. It perpetually seeks harmony to the flourishing of life. Though it is not without its own 'shadow' aspect in the contending forces within it, but most importantly it seeks out to achieve perfection.

More than anything else, the collective unconscious is a force of life which includes death. It is rejuvenation, renewal, replenishment. It is nurture, it is balance. It is the embodiment of **change**, it is selfless in the production of new forms of life, providing replacement for older forms of culture. Its eruptions pose the '**alternative**' in a society with decaying tradition. The collective unconscious is naturally in polarity to the cannon or tradition in a state of rigidity. When in compensatory mode to this decaying imbalance, **tension** is set on, in the undisguised confrontation between the waves of fixation in the collective consciousness and the forces of renewal from the **self**-desiring psyche health for society. In this tension, the self-collective unconscious compensates by strongly identifying with the progressive elements in the status quo (tradition) to right inherent imbalance.

The 'established' tradition in its habit puts up the image of an **ego** seeking autonomy from the self, a disastrous situation that beckons neurosis. **Can a society stay healthy outside the totality of its being?** Contradiction, conflict, especially on the inside is toxic. This is the phenomenon of **collective imbalance**, the instability typical to regressive societies when in resistance to progressive **change**.

Within the scope of this exhibition, I move beyond this theory into **resolution**. The tension between the collective consciousness and unconsciousness creates a third force of resolution. This is where this exhibition is situated for personal and collective healing. This is the space of

concentration, of contemplation, of stability where the equations of reconciliation of opposing extremes; the forces of salvation and oppression is perfected for progress in truth. It is resolution to a meaningful whole and purpose.

What is achieved in this space is typical picture of a matured ego-self axis (relationship), but this time it involves the whole society. The Covid-19 pandemic is a bright example of the balance seeking eruptions of the collective unconscious. It has shocked, shaken us to our wit's end and it is demanding correction in our recklessness and aggressive attitude in modern times towards the natural environment and human relationships. The mutations of these virulent pathogens, consciously or unconsciously created, all exist within the bounds of providence. The breakdown of law and order in society can take away the bright dreams of our future. The Covid-19 pandemic is a psyche event, symbolic in its totality. It holds us still, it has slowed us down to think, to reflect our carefree attitude. I don't care whose horse is gored mindset in the face of this **mercurial** challenge nature is capable of posing against us.

Approaching the aesthetic modality of an 'Area-scape', the structure of the collective self designations explored have their own image signifiers. I call them **motifs** or **area elements**, character representations that act as facade for their energy interiors and also contacts for cognitive purposes. This pool of motifs is the system of images in a society. It is a field of dynamic image-energy, a garb of embellishment that parallels the rhythm of the collective self. Image here takes into consideration form and design, within this realm lies the seed images that form the bedrock of the works for this exhibition.

I worked on the peculiarity of my clime's psyche structure, using my own psyche as a measure. I took into consideration the treasure of its aesthetic dynamics to create an art form that is local and yet global from streetwise elements. These pedestrian self-taught graphic expressions-cum-ideographs seen on commercial buses, signages, murals and other utilitarian items in somewhat veiled view, are elevated to what can be taken as high or sophisticated art.

In my works, I honed in on the need for love that creates empathy, and the need for truth and clarity of thought for good to dominate evil. I emphasised the struggles for self-determination and advancement amidst the all pervading agony: the hardship/volatility of living. I explored adventures in faith for psyche stability — mind-over-matter voyages — the heightened expression of joy found on the journey of life. Such ecstatic joys are often a compensation for harrowing realities. There are also works that revolve essentially on the idea of play akin to childlike innocence.

The video installation explores the boundless possibility of creation even in a tiny fragment of life. A micro slice of video clip is looped repeatedly creating a rhythm that stimulates gyration. A two headed audio-visual rhythm is achieved simultaneously in this stream. Another short video clip from my *Freking stars* series, which I call 'first time flying', expresses the joy of freedom in an infinite space. This is personally connected to the joy of discovery in mental flight, the ecstasy of awareness of infinite possibilities.

How does it feel to have wings and fly like a bird as a human?

Demola Ogunajo
2020

About Demola Ogunajo

Born in 1973 in Ibadan, Nigeria, Demola Ogunajo studied painting at Obafemi Awolowo University. He works as a freelance artist and is the creative director of FLUX-CITY Studio. He has illustrated for *Glendora Review - An African Quarterly Journal for the Arts*, in addition to numerous album covers and books.

After early solo exhibitions in Port Harcourt and Lagos, Ogunajo presented *Animystic City* at Signature Gallery in Lagos in 2004. His solo exhibition, *Mustard Seed*, was held at Nimbus Gallery in Lagos in 2014. His artworks have been exhibited at Art Twenty One (Lagos), 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair (London), Goethe Institute (Lagos), the National Museum (Lagos), and Tribes (Lagos).

Ogunajo's work is featured in the anthology *Artists of Nigeria* by Onyema Offoedu (2012) and the catalogue for *Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo Kuti* published by the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York (2003). In 2005, he served as the main illustrator for the Glendora publication project *A City at Work*, sponsored by the Prince Claus Fund. He has created artworks for creative houses in Nigeria including Jazzhole Records and Bogobiri. His artwork served as the cover art for *Intervention*, an essay by Wole Soyinka. In 2012, he produced the cover art and design for the album *Rocket Juice and the Moon*, produced by Honest Jons Record Label in London.

Ogunajo lives and works in Ota, Ogun State, 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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