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Eva Obodo

Recent Works

The New Nsukka School series

25 February - 18 March 2021

Acknowledgements

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COVER:

FRONT COVER: *Anonymous*, 2020, jute, cloth, thread

FRONTISPIECE: *Spillover*, 2021, cloth

BACK COVER: *Serious Business I*, 2020, charcoal, metal, acrylic

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kó is pleased to present a solo exhibition by Eva Obodo, titled *Recent Works*. This exhibition is the second iteration 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 also includes solo exhibitions by Ngozi-Omeje Ezema 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.

Eva Obodo creates mixed media artworks using jute and charcoal which are formed by processes of wrapping, tying and bundling. Obodo's compositions are used as metaphors to critique socio-political and economic structures that frame contemporary culture. This exhibition reflects a new direction in Obodo's practice with his exploration of cloth, moving more into three-dimensional space.

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 visuality 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.



Eva Obodo: The Power of Three

Dr. George Odoh

Having once more renewed the potency of his visual incantations, Eva Obodo, in the guise of a creative magus, arrives from the east bearing gifts of jute, charcoal and cloth. If one may ask, what is it about Eva Obodo's visual statements in jute fibre, charcoal and cloth that elicit from us, a prolonged gaze; a strong desire to touch and the exciting feeling of knowing that one is in the presence of something so different, so beautiful, so sublime? The answer lies in the profundity and perspicacity of his creative imagination as eloquently expressed in this exhibition of his recent mixed media works. The exhibition also announces with unbridled clarity, the expansiveness and penetrative depth of his artistic vision as well as his humanizing response to the conflicts and contradictions that define his immediate environment.

The visuality of Obodo's art revolves around the number *three*. Symbolically, "three is the first number to which the meaning "all" was given....The power of three is universal and is the tripartite nature of the world as heaven, earth, and waters. It is human as body, soul and spirit."¹ Manifestations of this number in Eva Obodo's art can be read in the three dominant materials (jute, charcoal and cloth) that are at the heart of his creative investigations. Also, his art embodies three defining qualities. The first has to do with the critical engagement of the correlative function(s) of ideas, materials and processes, three fundamental ingredients of the creative process. The second is the radicality of formal language which underpins the ingeniousness of Obodo's creative imagination as well as the edifying exertions of his experimental spirit in transmuting the materiality and symbolic worth of commonplace materials into evocative imageries. The third is its strong and unwavering focus on the human condition.

Unquestionably, Eva Obodo is one of the most exciting artists of the 21st century post-*uli* Nsukka art school. His deep connections with the Nsukka art department, where he studied and presently teaches, constitute influential signposts that visibly mark the stylistic landscape of his art. In addition to immersing his artistic sensibilities in the conceptual, experimental and intellectual fountains of the art department's creative ideology, his close interactions with El Anatsui, the globally renowned artist and one of the leading lights of the Nsukka art school, profoundly impacted on his art practice. According to Obodo, "Of all the artists that say that they are El's students, I think I am closest to him, I have worked very closely with him more than any other person I can think of."² In addition to his formal encounters with Anatsui during his

undergraduate and graduate studies, Obodo also worked as a studio assistant in Anatsui's studio for many years. Stylistic deconstruction of his art reveals, in very clear terms, influences arising from his proximity to El Anatsui's conceptual and experimental space. His closeness to Anatsui which he equates to the relationship between father and son³ has endured over the years and so has the creative nourishment that comes with such intimate association. Seen from the context of master-disciple relationship, many Nsukka artists including Eva Obodo discovered their 'northern star' within the illuminating and equally stimulating ambiance of Anatsui's influence. Simply put, they found their creative voice in the kingdom of El Anatsui.

In Eva Obodo's art, we find mutable echoes of the radical politics which stoked the creative embers of the *uli* revivalism movement in the Nsukka art department in the early 1970s. Sylvester Ogbechie defines this radical politics as "a special focus on material culture within a process of political transformation."⁴ This radical attitude not only placed emphasis on "ancestral knowledge based on awareness of one's location in the continuum of cultural knowledge and time,"⁵ it also enabled Nsukka school of artists to emerge "into positions of prominence in the global discourse of modern and contemporary art because of their sustained focus on radical practice."⁶ The radical tone of Obodo's art is expressively modulated by the polyvalent nature of his search for artistic nirvana. This is reflected in his ability to simultaneously explore the potentialities of jute fibre, charcoal and cloth without compromising the integrity of formal language as well as the clarity of both his artistic and social vision. With the penetrative eye of an eagle and dexterity of a skilled cartographer, he insightfully maps the material landscapes of his mediums, creatively transmuting their intrinsic and extrinsic properties into visual and metaphoric codes that interrogate the polarizing spectacles and traumatic experiences that define the Nigerian state. In a poetic sense, his visions of the human condition are presented as humanizing gifts metaphorically wrapped in the materiality of his media and the symbolic gestures of his work processes.

Eva Obodo interrogates existential challenges in Nigeria using materials, processes and imageries that evocatively construct the realities of lived experiences. He had earlier explained that he works his materials together using processes like tying, sewing and stitching which yield visual narratives and metaphors that draw attention to the complex socio-political and economic structures of contemporary culture.⁷ Although his works do not directly appropriate images from the vast streams of visual tropes framing contemporary visual culture, the imageries that anchor his themes show that he is wired to its mass mediated messages. Two works from the charcoal series, *House of Palliatives* and *Narratives of Palliatives*, articulate his conceptual reading of the videos and images which went viral on social media during the looting of COVID-19

palliatives stored in various warehouses across many states in Nigeria. Coming at the back of the killing of unarmed protesters at Lekki toll gate on October 20, 2020, during the #EndSARS protest against police brutality, the optics created by images of Nigerian masses in a frenzied state struggling to collect palliatives which they believe were meant for them but hoarded by selfish politicians aptly reflect the crisis of leadership that has plagued Nigeria for several decades. The works highlight the fractious relationship between the political elite and the subaltern.

The narratives embodied in *Serious Business I*, *Contract Award*, *Entanglement*, *Nightmare* and *Amoebae on the Run*, equally paint troubling pictures of the unwholesome underbelly of the Nigerian state. The architecture of his charcoal series reveals tightly packed formations occasionally broken up by gaps that show underlying materials such as wire mesh and cloth. While Karen Millbourne describes this as constituting a “landscape of resources and loss,”⁸ Ozioma Onuzulike likens the compact nature of the composition to “units of houses in a densely populated neighbourhood.”⁹ Conceptually, the individual identity of a unit of charcoal is as important as the group identity when viewed together. Contextually, we are reminded of the stratified nature of society and how the individual, family and community activate and also sustain its social constructions and dynamics. Obodo sees in charcoal a potent resource for addressing issues relating to identity and rites of passage. Thus, in his works, each charcoal unit may be read as a symbolic portrait that highlights how individuals uniquely bear the scar of traumatizing experiences. Viewed as a whole, individual scars achieve a critical mass that loudly vocalizes the collective scars of shared experiences. This coming together evokes a feeling of *communitas* which, in the context of a conflict situation, enables oppressed people to draw strength from a collective struggle and consequently generate power strong enough to challenge the forces responsible for their victimhood in order to change their fortunes and positions in life.

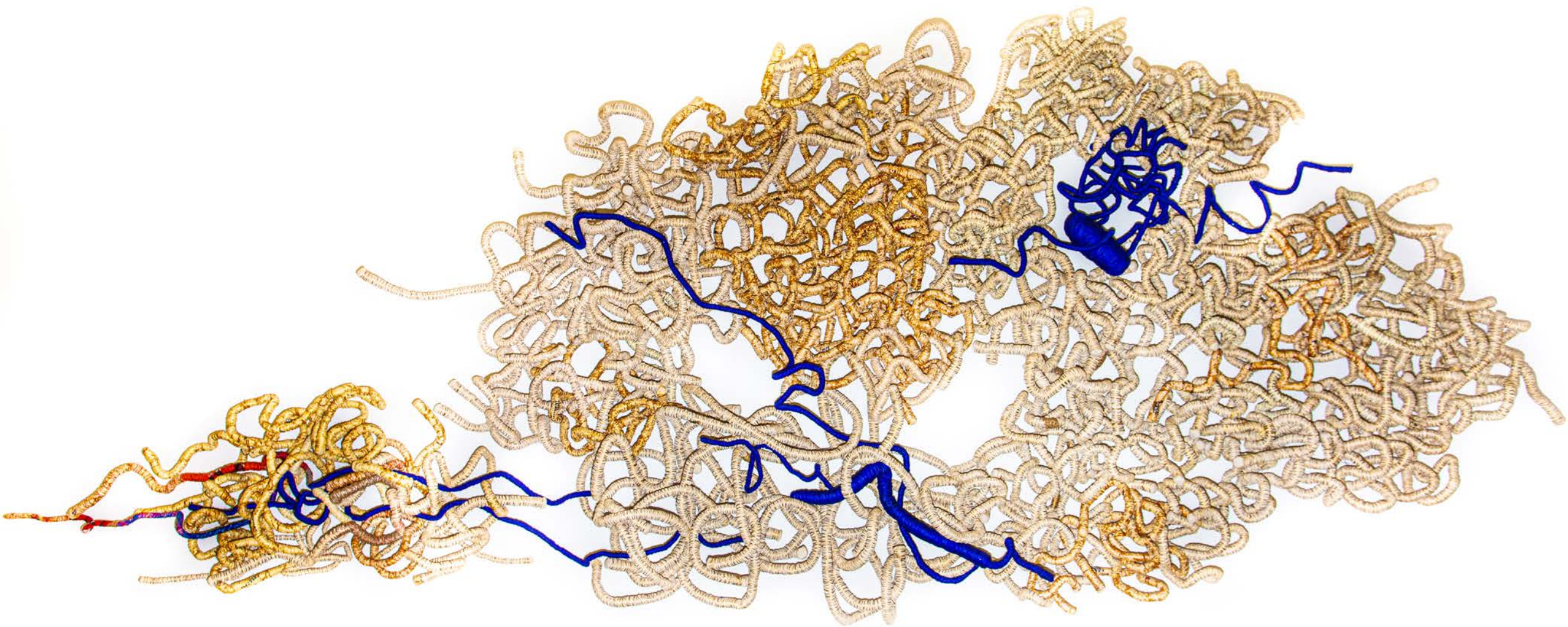
The forms and imageries in his jute fibre works and cloth installations (a recent addition to his art) are by no means less impressive or expressive in narrating the human condition. The dynamic convoluted structures of his jute fibre works embody reticulated visions of the interconnectivity of identity, fate and destiny in the grand scheme of life. The energy exuded by the rhythmic movement of entangled lines is metaphorically channeled in *Emissions* to address the ecological impact of man's activities in the environment. In *Current*, *Nightmare*, *Organic Movement* and *Entanglement*, we read into the chaotic and multi-directional movement of the ‘bound’ jute forms, the pulsating heart beat of a world that never sleeps, always growing within and out of itself; a world that captures the energetic struggles of man as he tries to navigate the labyrinthine roadblocks imposed by existential challenges.

Eva Obodo's art is at the threshold of a major stylistic shift. *Every Face is Facing Something*, *What If These Were Straight*, *House of Palliatives*, *Regret I*, *Spillover* and *New Year Present* are the avant-garde. While the first three reveal attempts to relocate his charcoal and jute fibre works from the restrictive embrace of the wall to the more engaging three-dimensional space, the other three highlight a more critical attention and intense dialogue with the potentialities of cloth. Configured as installations, its electrifying presence is anchored on the sensuous movement of cascading forms as well as from the interesting colour nuances that characterize its monochromatic and polychromatic colour registers. In summary, this exhibition affirms that the ‘new Nsukka art school’ is very much alive and well. In Eva Obodo's gifts of jute, charcoal and cloth, we are not only invited to revel in the radical, sensuous and edifying ambience of his works, we are also called upon to pay attention to its humanizing messages which communicate in very evocative terms, who we are, what we have become, and what we can be as a people.

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University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Notes and references

1. See The Symbolism and Spiritual Significance of the Number Three.. Available from <https://www.bookofthrees.com/the-symbolism-and-spiritual-significance-of-the-number-three/>
2. During my interview with Eva Obodo at the Nsukka art department on February 3, 2021, he narrated in insightful details, his long-standing relationship with El Anatsui and the impact it has had on his art practice.
3. Interview with Eva Obodo, February 3, 2021
4. See Ogbachie, S. O. (2009) From aasks to metal cloth: Artists of the Nsukka school and the problems of ethnicity. *Critical Interventions*, 3(4), pp. 133-146.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. See Eva Obodo's artist statement in the catalogue of his solo exhibition, *Ngwugwu (Packages)*, Lagos: Art House.
8. See Millbourne, K. E. (2019). Eva Obodo's vibrant secrets. *Ngwugwu (Packages)*, Lagos: Art House, The Space.
9. See Onuzulike, O. (2019). Eva Obodo: Looking and seeing through language. *Ngwugwu (Packages)*, Lagos: Art House, The Space.



The Power and Importance of Eva Obodo's Sculpture

Prof. Cliff Ezekwe Nwanna

I got more familiar with the sculpture of Eva Obodo in 2014 when I served as a visiting professor to the Department Of Fine and Applied Arts, University Of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he taught sculpture. Having believed to have a measure of expertise in the field of contemporary Nigerian art and of the Nsukka art school in particular, I was amazed to discover an artist with whose works I was not familiar.

I cite my 'introduction' here to serve as an index of the extent of continuing level of neglect and ignorance about the art practices of 'new generation artists in Nigeria'. Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, Uche Okeke and his peers dominated the history of contemporary Nigerian art. While we reckon them as being among the significant catalysts for the development of visual arts in West Africa since 1950, in re-shaping the developments of a modernism initiated by Aina Onabolu (1882-1962), we should not disparage the work of the younger artists that have continued to walk in their footprints.

Eva Obodo deserves significant scholarly attention, giving an insight into himself and his sources of inspiration or a critical assessment of his work. This is necessary because Obodo from my perspective represents a significant body of work, not only his own creations but also those of his predecessors and contemporaries, as well as many African artists who are practicing but are yet to enter the international limelight. It is not surprising that some Nigerian art writers have traced some significant threads of Obodo's influence to El Anatsui, who was his sculpture lecturer and mentor.

Eva Obodo's sculptures selected for this exhibition are a brief introduction to an audience that may be encountering his work for the first time. Obodo's art functions as an instrument for socio-political activism and cultural re-affirmation. Looking at his oeuvre, themes in such works as *House of Palliatives*, *Narratives of Palliatives*, *Two Packs: One for You* and *One for Me* and *Amoebae on the run* engage the state of Nigerian contemporary political leadership and the state of civil response to the leadership.

His work also addresses the misappropriation of food and other items set aside to mitigate the hardships faced by the masses under the scourge of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent "End Sars Protests", when youths reacted to the evils perpetrated by bloody ravaging predators known as the "Special Anti Robbery Squad (SARS)". SARS was created to serve as an elite unit of the police force to fight armed robbery and banditry, but they turned around to intimidate and kill the innocent civilians that they were supposed to protect. These activities, spear-headed by government agencies, underscore the failure of political leadership in Nigeria.

Obodo's sculptures such as *Emission* and *These were straight* reveal his passion for environmental protection. Today, mass media all over the world is suffused with news of harmful emissions caused by man, which has devastating effects on our planet, especially the depletion of the ozone layer. The artist activist decries the result of the continuous environmental degradation when he lamented and asked *What If These Were Straight?*

Eva Obodo's thematic engagement often appears subjective and allows his temperament to get the better of him. These are evident in themes such as *Regret*, *Nightmare*, *Behind Closed Doors* and *Serious Business II*. Looking at these works, one could feel the overpowering passion in the work. However, this does not diminish the merits of the works or dismiss them as lacking objective interrogation. After all, art is emotive and a vehicle for self expression. A reading of Obodo's oeuvre brings to mind Peter Reasons 'Theory of Participatory inquiry' which is geared towards a primary way of enhancing the validity of inquirers' claim to subjective-objective reality. Reason insists that "primary experience" can be critically subjective.

A formalist reading of Eva Obodo's work also gives an insight into the Structural-Functionalist position on oppositional complementary, order and disorder. It is through order that disorder emerges. It is also possible to interrogate order through disorder.

Stylistically, Obodo's sculptures are modern, but beyond modernism and avant-gardism, one could not fail to observe his ethno-aesthetic roots, which is the traditional Igbo Uli Art. Uli interweave and form the background of his modernism.

Through Obodo's Structural-Functionalist approach, he engaged realities as he shares the burden of the most vulnerable population in Nigeria. He animates these invisible people in our society — the poor, the homeless and the marginalized — and call for our attention to the challenges they face.

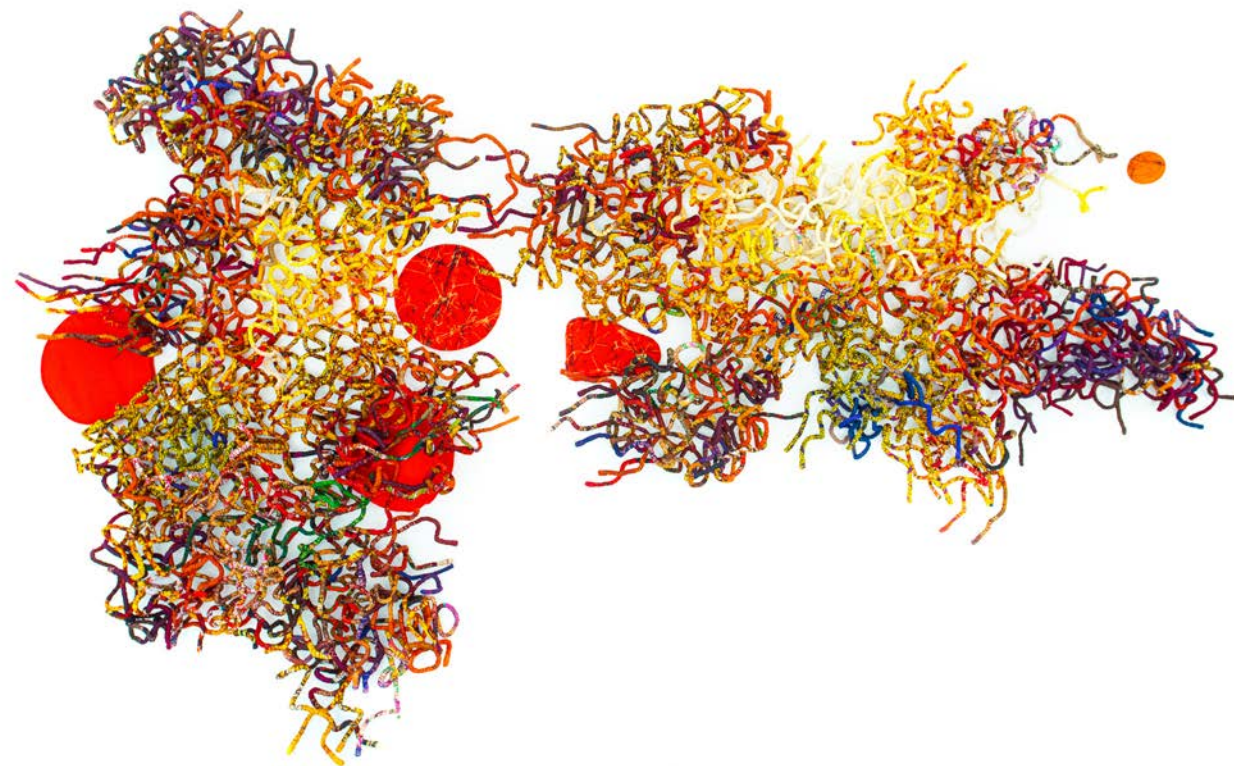
In all, one can describe Eva Obodo as one who bears the burden of truth. He is a true witness who can only be relieved of the burden by sharing the truth. A Chinese proverb says that "truth is always in the hands of a few". The works of Eva Obodo are shocking evidence of the failure in the Nigerian political system and a frank assessment of reality.

Prof. Cliff Ezekwe Nwanna, FSNA
Fine Artist and Art Historian
Dean, Faculty of Environmental Sciences
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
January, 2021.





Eva Obodo
New Year Present
2020
Cloth
139.8 x 76.7 x 3.9 in. (355 x 195 x 10 cm.)



Eva Obodo
Emissions
2020
Jute, cloth, thread
145.6 x 84.2 x 6.7 in. (370 x 214 x 17 cm.)



Eva Obodo
Organic Movements
2019
Jute, cloth, thread
126 x 39.4 x 7 in. (320 x 100 x 18 cm.)



Eva Obodo
Regret
2020
Cloth
105.5 x 74.8 x 3.9 in. (268 x 190 x 10 cm.)



Eva Obodo
Every Face is Facing Something
2020
Charcoal, metal, acrylic
37 x 86.6 x 31.5 in. (94 x 220 x 80 cm.)



Eva Obodo
House of Palliatives
2020
Charcoal, metal, acrylic
41.3 x 72.8 x 26 in. (105 x 185 x 66 cm.)



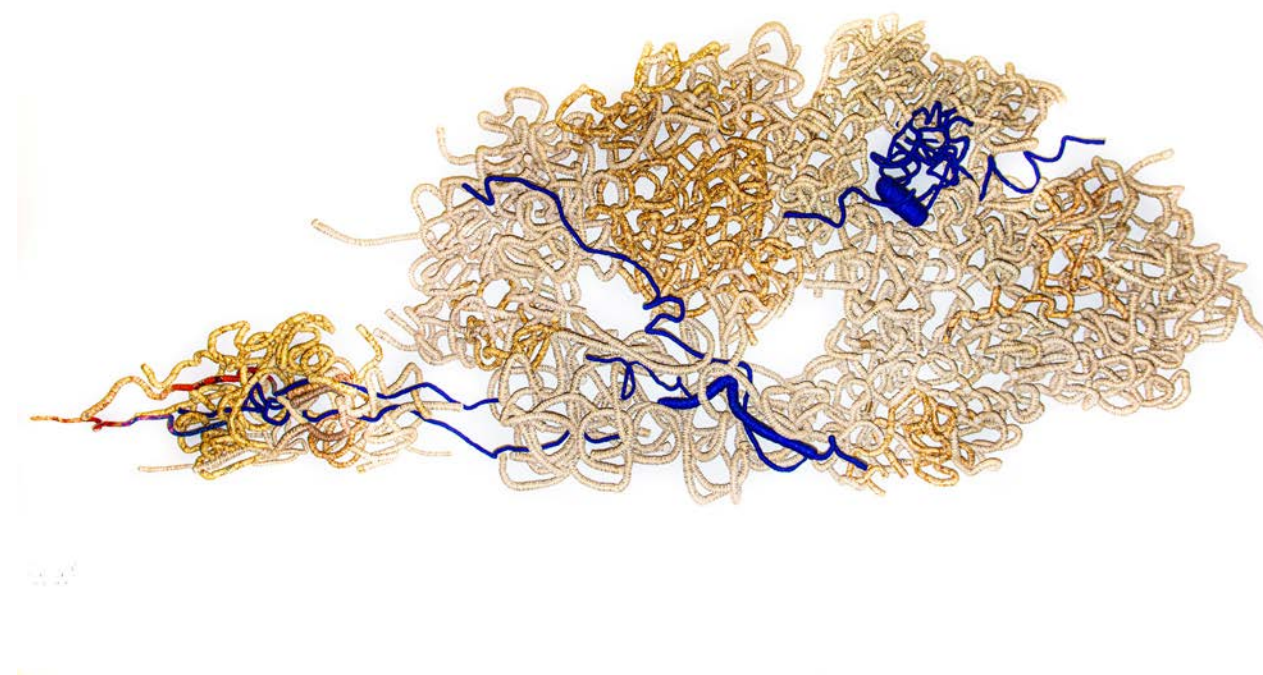


Eva Obodo
Narratives of Palliatives
2020
Charcoal, metal, acrylic
73.6 x 33.5 x 1.6 in. (187 x 85 x 4 cm.)



Eva Obodo
What If These Were Straight?
2020
Jute, cloth, thread
45.3 x 93.7 x 31.5 in. (115 x 238 x 80 cm.)

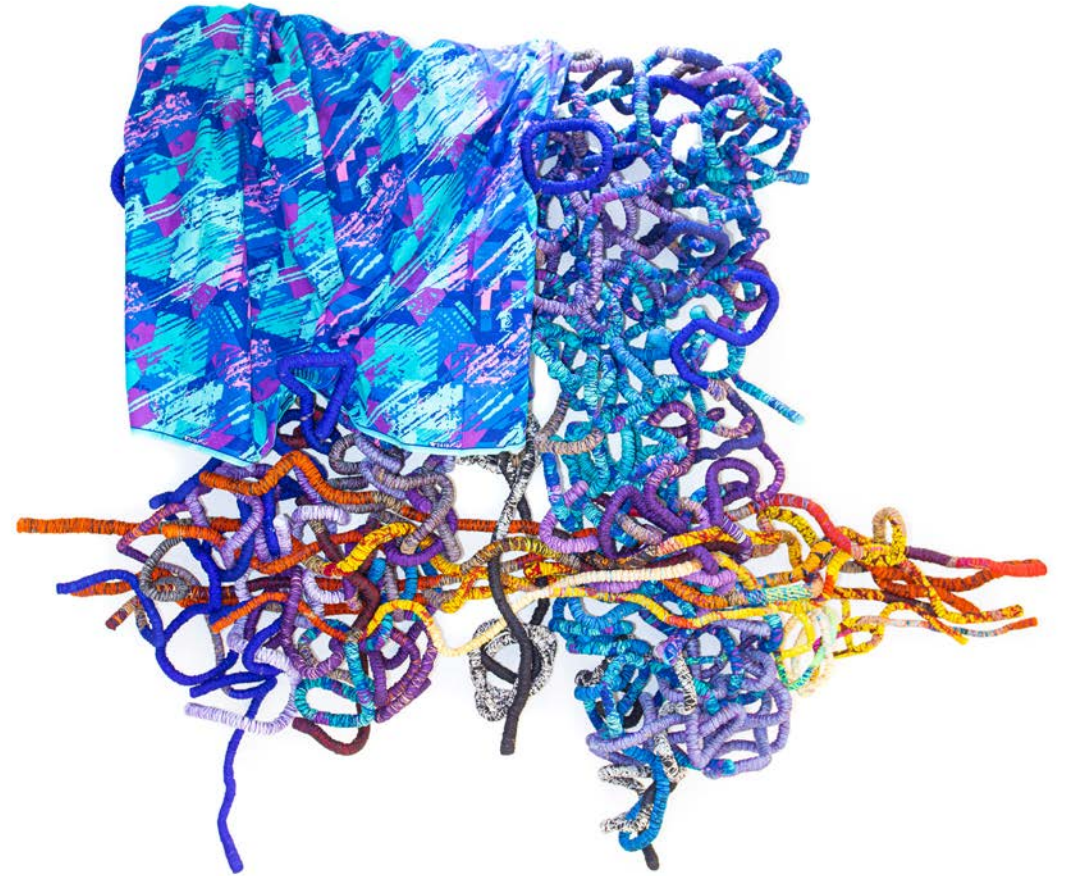




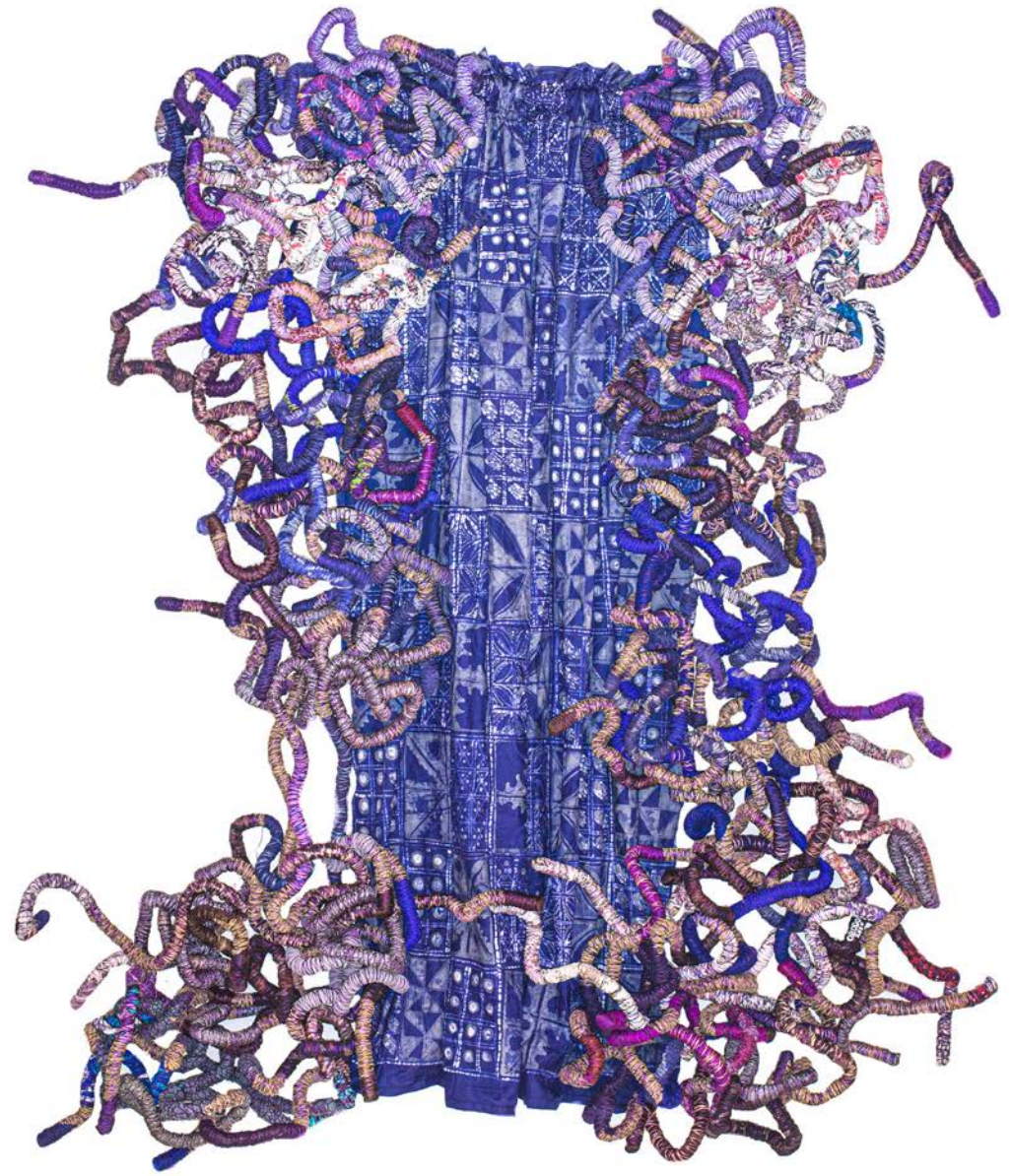
Eva Obodo
Amoebae on the Run
2019
Jute, cloth, thread
157.5 x 57 x 9.8 in. (400 x 145 x 25 cm.)



Eva Obodo
Anonymous
2020
Jute, cloth, thread
78 x 57 x 7.9 in. (198 x 145 x 20 cm.)



Eva Obodo
Current
2020
Jute, cloth, thread
70.8 x 57 x 7.9 in. (180 x 145 x 20 cm.)



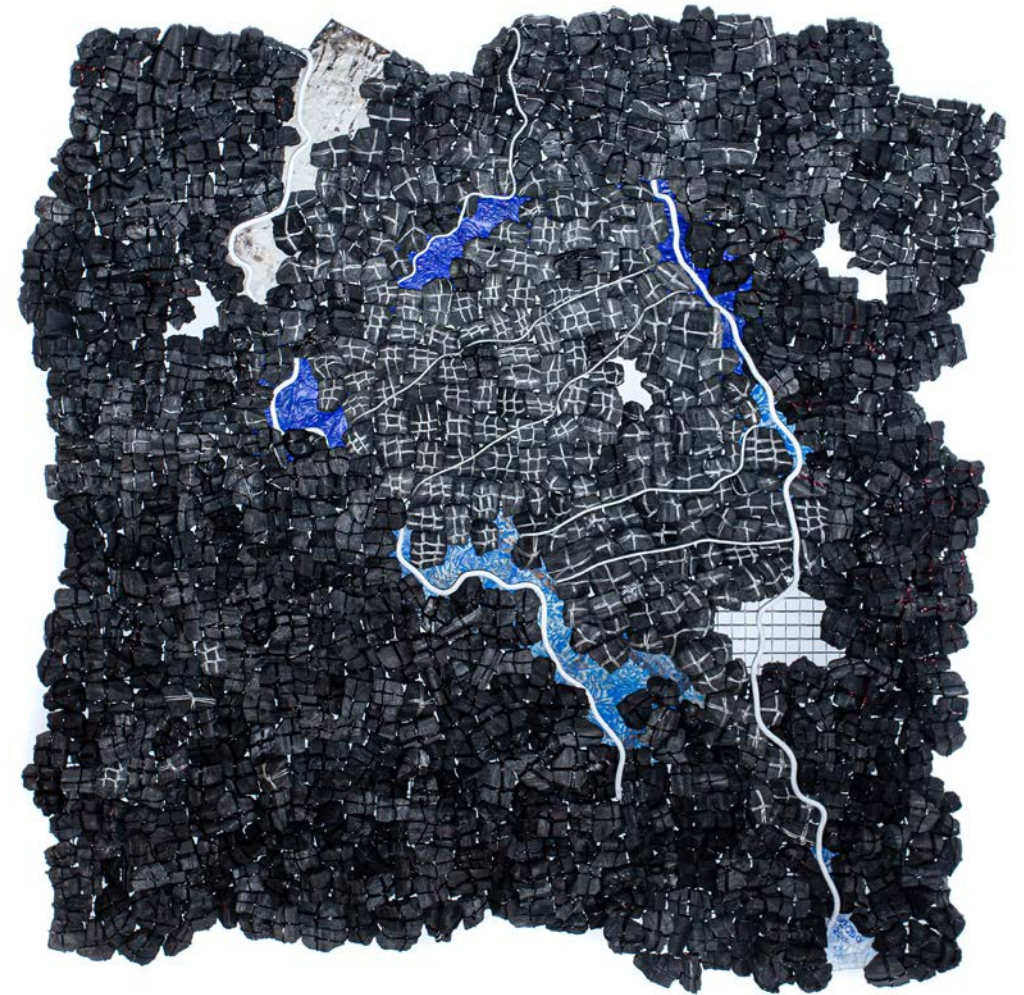
Eva Obodo
Behind Closed Door
2020
Jute, cloth, thread
64.2 x 68.9 x 7 in. (163 x 175 x 18 cm.)



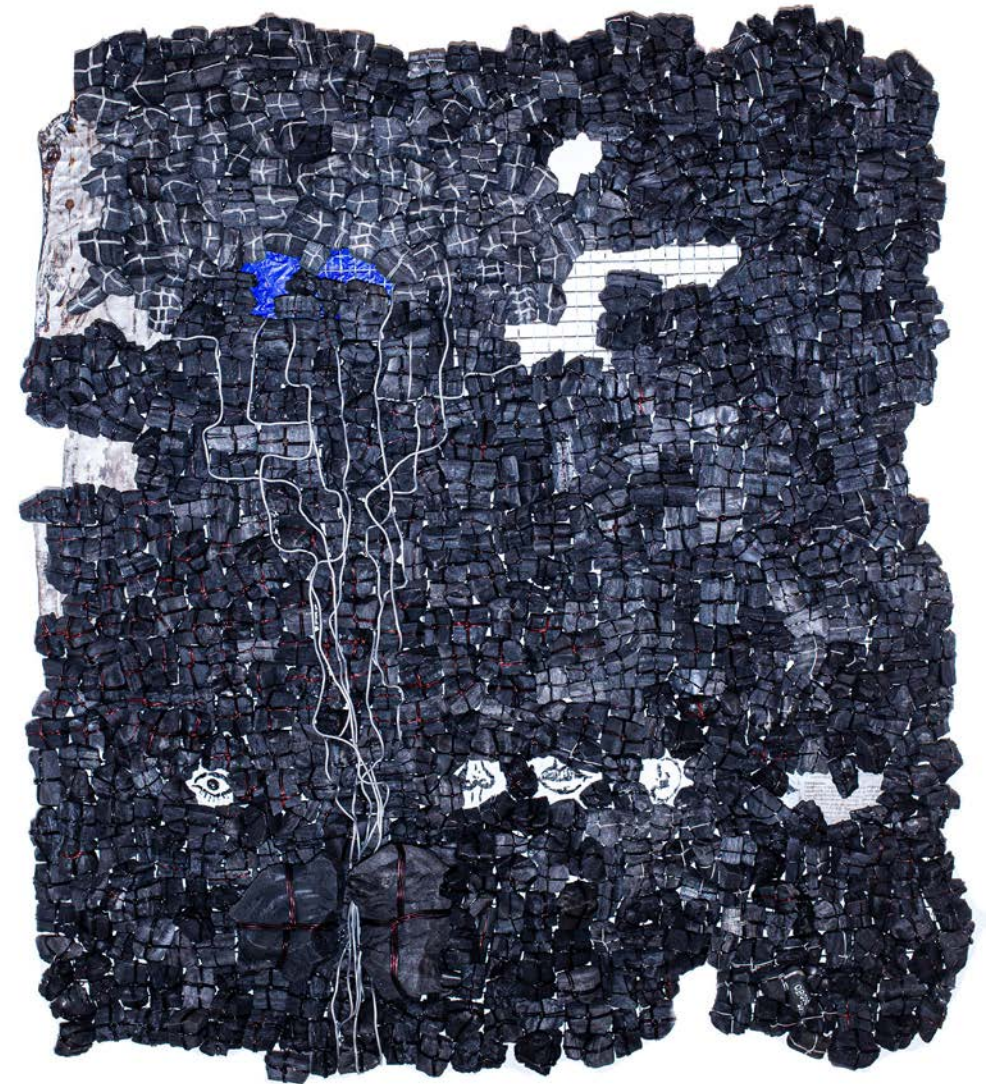
Eva Obodo
Recent Works



Eva Obodo
Spillover
2021
Cloth
106.3 x 72.8 x 3.1 in. (270 x 185 x 8 cm.)



Eva Obodo
Contract Award
2020
Charcoal, metal, acrylic
35.4 x 35.4 x 1.6 in. (90 x 90 x 4 cm.)



Eva Obodo
Two Packs: One for You One for Me
2020
Charcoal, metal, acrylic
31.9 x 35.4 x 3.1 in. (81 x 90 x 8 cm.)



Eva Obodo
Serious Business I
2020
Charcoal, metal, acrylic
36.6 x 36.6 x 1.6 in. (93 x 93 x 4 cm.)

Eva Obodo
Serious Business II
2020
Charcoal, metal, acrylic
35.8 x 35.4 x 1.6 in. (91 x 90 x 4 cm.)





Eva Obodo
Entanglement
2019
Jute, cloth, thread
122 x 55.1 x 7 in. (310 x 140 x 18 cm.)



Eva Obodo
Nightmare
2020
Jute, cloth, thread
92.5 x 81.1 x 18.1 in. (235 x 206 x 46 cm.)

Eva Obodo
Pensioner's Clothesline
2021
Jute, dye, cloth, wood, metal, plastic
127.6 x 83.5 x 33.9 in. (324 x 212 x 86 cm.)



About the Artist

Eva Obodo currently serves as Senior Lecturer in sculpture at University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he received his MFA and PhD. He was formerly a lecturer at Benue State Polytechnic, Ugbokolo. Obodo has held two solo exhibitions with Arthouse-The Space in Lagos, including *Ngwugwu (Packages)* in 2019 and *Line.by.Line* in 2015. He has participated in several international exhibitions including the Osaka Triennale (Japan) and DAK'ART (Senegal). In 2013, he was the recipient of the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship Award.



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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