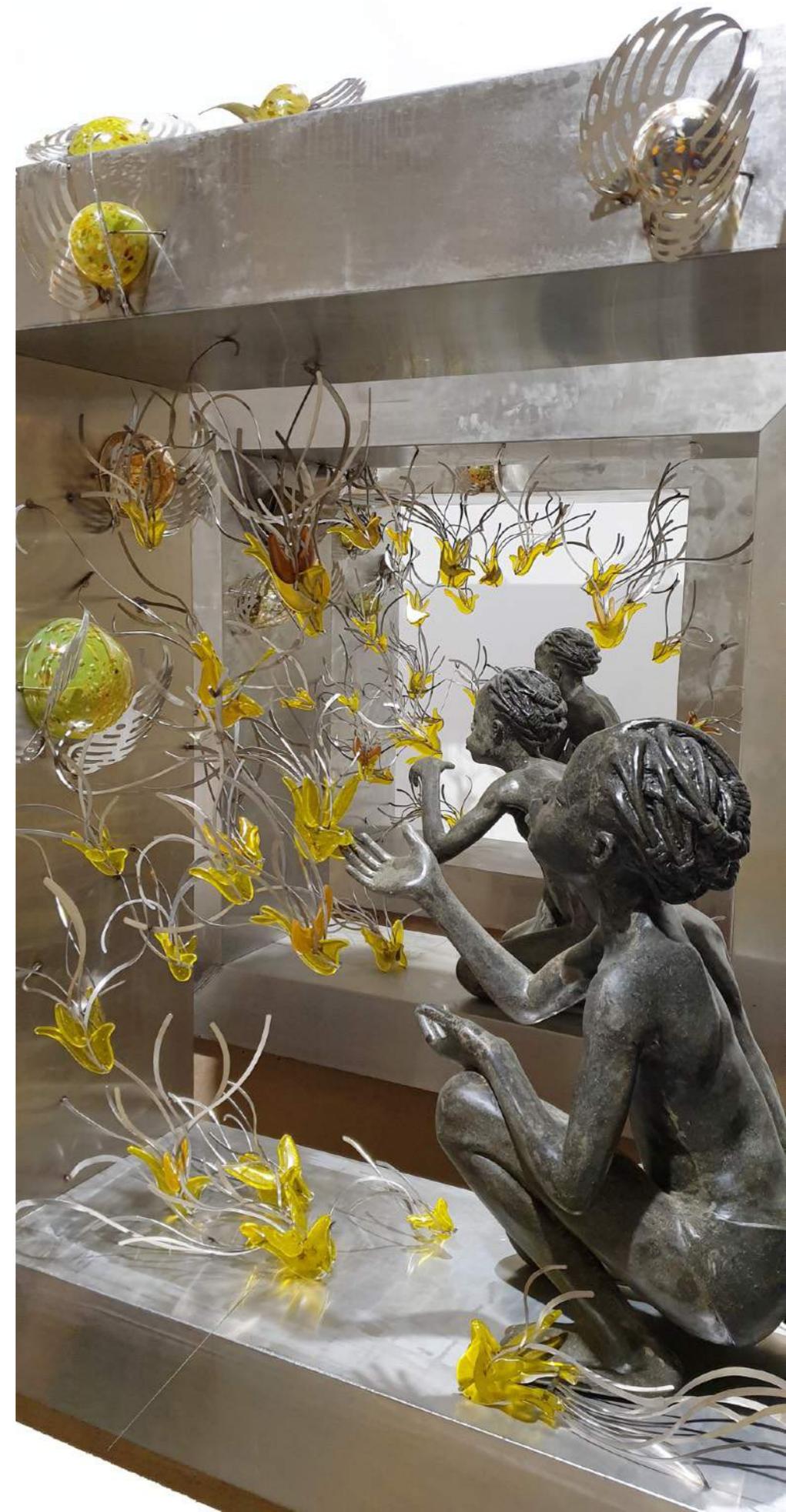


Peju Alatise
Sim and the Glass Birds
2022

Presented at Frieze Sculpture
Regent's Park, London

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kó







Peju Alatise is an interdisciplinary artist, architect, and author of two novels. A leading voice of contemporary art in Africa, Alatise produces artworks through the lens of spirituality and Yoruba cosmology, leaning into ancient storytelling traditions and crafting alternative social imagery.

Her work is pointedly political, often provoking reflections about social issues both at home and abroad. Alatise has explored issues of exploitative labour practices in Nigeria, children's rights with a focus on young girls, and state-sanctioned violence against citizens.

Her artistic practice is relentlessly experimental and labour-intensive, working across a variety of mediums, techniques, and materials including painting, film, installation, and sculpture.



Peju Alatise in her studio in Glasgow, Scotland.

Sim and the Glass Birds (2022) is the latest installment of the artist's career-long preoccupation with exploring the world of marginalised young girls through ambitious sculptural representation and Yoruba mythology and folklore.

Sim & The Glass Birds is the visual response to a story Alatise herself wrote about a young girl who constantly escapes to a dream world where she is safe and finds rest, away from the troubles of an earthly world that cages her ambitions, relegating her to inferior citizenship, and declares she has no rights.

Today, in Nigeria, a young girl under the age of twelve can be legally married. She can be "hired" and treated as an adult worker in domestic labour. She may not be allowed to seek an education. So little girls like Sim must find escape and release. Yoruba mythology is laden with stories of gods and creatures with powers commanding thunder, water, retribution, and abundance whose purpose for being is to protect and provide. It is in this dreamscape told through folklore and stories that Sim finds solace, and which Alatise employs as a point of departure for her sculptures.



Peju Alatise, *Sim and the Glass Birds*, 2022, granite cast, stainless steel, mild steel, resin, and glass, four-sculpture installation, 160 cm x 160 cm x 70 cm per frame (excluding base).



Sim and the glass birds

by Péju Alatise 2022

Sim always thought the difference between being awake and dreaming was that the first had you seeing with your eyes while the other had you seeing with your mind. Who was to tell her one was real and the other was not?

Sim's dreams always made more sense than the 'other side' of life. Well, that was until Emiogo stopped visiting her in her dreams. For Sim, real life is where love is and if her beloved friend, Emiogo ceased to live in her dreams, then Sim had no reason to go to sleep.

But sleep came anyways. And with sleep came Magic. In Sim's dreams, words were tangible and weighed much more than the words from the 'other side', where words were spewed, spat, yelled and even cursed at her.

In Sim's dreams, words could sit pretty, climb trees, laugh, dance and fly. Yes, fly!! That was it! Sim would send words to Emiogo. The words would fly and when they found their way to Emiogo, the words would say "come back".



In this four-panel installation, incorporating granite cast, stainless steel, and glass, the character Sim is suspended in this dreamscape, crossing a portal between Earthly life and the other world. She is in the company of foreboding and mythological creatures — glass birds in flight — which are caught over the panels and which will eventually break. Its delicate nature is a metaphor for the fleeting nature of escape in itself and its inevitable, unfortunate end.











Peju Alatise (b. 1975, Nigeria) exhibited at the Venice Architectural Biennale in 2021 and was selected to represent Nigeria's debut pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale in 2017. She was the recipient of the FNB Art Prize at the Joburg Art Fair in 2018. Alatise is a fellow at the National Museum of African Art, part of the Smithsonian Institution, and work has been collected by the Smithsonian Institute. She is the founder of Alter Native Artists Initiative, an incubatory artist collective that offers training programs and residencies to young, emerging artists. Her debut novel, *Orita Meta*, chronicling the interwoven path of three women, was nominated for the ANA/Flora Nwapa Prize for Women's Writing in 2006.

Alatise is based in Lagos, Nigeria and Glasgow, UK.





Sim and the glass birds

by Péju Alatise 2022

Many of Sim's dreams start with an opened door. Emiogo was always on the other side to let her in.

Then one night, Emiogo stopped opening the door to Sim.

Every night after that night, Sim sat eagerly before the door, hoping Emiogo would in some way open the door to let her in. Every night became too many nights. Sim lost her patience. It was useless knocking on the door. The door was too dense, it absorbed every sound. Sim yelled at the door, threw herself at the door, begged and cried at the door. The door only seemed to heave rhythmically, as though it could breathe. It heaved more deeply at Sim's touch. The door was alive!

Sim sang to the door; remembering when Emiogo once told her "if voices can be seen, your voice would look like an agbalumo tree. When you sing, the fruits on the tree will ripen and fall." Sim laughed to herself at the thought. Sim talked to the door; sat so closely to it that she was comforted by every sigh it made. With every word spoken, by Sim, the door would grow a leaf or two. Sim talked about her life outside of her dreams and a night came, she had a lot to say.

She talked so much the door grew a whole branch full of leaves. Soon enough, the yellow birds appeared on the branch. They were different from the birds she had known.

The birds were fragile, they broke like glass when touched or when they moved. Sim tried to put the pieces of broken birds back together but they became crooked. The crooked birds flew in a crooked way and sang crooked songs. But! The crooked birds were beautiful in light. They could refract light in ways the wholesome birds could not, and Sim loved them the more.

Sim's dreams were full of iridescent lights as she fixed broken birds. They reminded her of her life outside of her dreams. Though that life was anything but perfect, she had to learn to let light in.

Sim and the glass birds

by Péju Alatise 2022

This night, Sim dreamed of a different door. It was opened. The Red door, the silent door. In it was nothing. Nothing! No light, not a sound, no one, not a sight. Nothing stretched before her and she waited. She waited a long time.

This night was not the only night she dreamed of this door. For three nights she waited at the threshold of the red door. She would send in her yellow crooked birds with messages to Emiogo through this door but nothing came back. Not the birds, not her dear friend Emiogo.

Sim visited her tutor, the witch.

"What is it about doors?!" Sim asked. "I thought doors are for coming and going, for entry and exits, for opening and closing." The witch said, "Doors are portals of connections between two opposing existences. Doors connect ins and outs! They are for locking up and setting free! For concealing and exposing, for beginning and ending, for giving and taking, for life and death, for...."

"And nothing? What does nothing mean? Three days now, I have dreamed about nothing." Sim interrupted the witch.

"Nothing could mean anything. Nothing is good. You could fill it with whatever you want. You can make of nothing, anything you wish, it's all up to you to do something about nothing. But there is one rule!", said the witch, "Whatever you put in is what you get out."

Sim and the glass birds

by Péju Alatise 2022

The grass looked blue, the trees looked purple, as they ought to look by moonlight. Emiogo ushered Sim into the garden of 'Orunmenitomala'.

The garden where magic happens. Tonight was special. The banana shaped moon was low hanging, beckoning on the girls to come nearer and sit on its tail. They have to fly to the moon to do so and neither of the girls could fly.

Sim and Emiogo told themselves they would learn to fly this night. They made wings for themselves and wore them on their backs. They met with a large flock of peculiar yellow birds. Extraordinary talkative birds that shimmer like glass in moonlight. The birds picked them up, flew them mid-air and said to the girls "trust Wind and she'll get you there!" It was easy for Emiogo to trust the wind.

But Sim! Sim was frightened.

"What if I fall?" Sim asked.

"There is nothing wrong with falling." Wind said.

"What if I die from falling?"

"Nobody dies here!"

Sim fell. It was at neck breaking speed. Just as she was about to hit the ground, Sim woke up. To a slap on her cheek.

Sim and the glass birds

by Péju Alatise 2022

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"Come back" were yellow, dainty birds that float not fly. When Sim blew at them, they came back.

kó is an art gallery 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.

Images in Regent's Park by Linda Nylind. Courtesy Frieze and Linda Nylind.