

Arts

Literary Review

Inspired by Yoruba cosmology, Tejumola Adenuga invades Art Twenty One

© 10th May 2024

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Tejumola Adenuga

By Damiete Braide

Nigerian-born, United Kingdom-based multidisciplinary artist, Tejumola Adenuga, evokes an African utopia with elements from his past in a new exhibition titled "Future, Past."

The opening ceremony of the exhibition took place at Art Twenty One, in Lagos, recently. Comprising portraits and minimalist design elements, the exhibition was inspired by the mythology about a small river in his ancestral homestead in Ijebu Ode, Ogun State, and the characters that framed its existence, looking to it as a source of creativity and life.

It conjures a place that is alive and vibrant with a revered divine entity within Yoruba mythology. Some of the sub-themes include a longing for expression, the possibilities of the human mind and the psyche, and the internal and external struggles that the process of creativity necessitates.

Adenuga's visually intricate ink drawings, characterised by elements of middle-class family life in Nigeria, solemn melancholic figures, curves and minimalist framing, present intimate and multi-layered imaginative scenes, creating what the artist refers to as "memories, present reality and future hopes" from the perspective of a child that grew up near the river.

Reflecting on the inspiration behind the exhibition, Adenuga said: "As an artist, I am often curious about the dichotomy of what is allowed to exist and what is possible to exist and how to navigate the tension between remembering and daydreaming.

"I come from a family of blacksmiths and, many years ago, I left Nigeria, carrying with me the weight of possibilities, dreams and creativity.

"These three factors have shaped my identity both as an artist and an occupant of the world. Growing up, I was surrounded by creativity by way of the artisans who marked the particulars of my life –the cobblers, the welders, the weavers, and this exhibition plays with the idea of a nearby communal river as the source of creativity.

"I am so delighted to return to Nigeria, the place in which I took form artistically, and to be able to investigate what that means through this exhibition."

From ink drawings to furniture inspired by his lineage of blacksmiths, Adenuga's exhibition injects mythology into the mundane and elevates its

characters with purpose, technicality and minimalism, offering a place in Africa where everything is possible, which in many ways is a prayer for both the artist and the viewer.

Caline Chagoury Moudaber, founder, Art Twenty One, remarked, "Tejumola's work evokes different meanings to different people and its quiet, intelligent simplicity is at once the power and triumph. It's so important for us to celebrate Nigerian culture and history, even while creating alternate worlds in which everyone is free to negotiate their capabilities outside of restrictive structures designed in service to a single narrative of a place.

"And that is what Tejumola does brilliantly. By exploring the re-making of a time and place through the real and imagined, his personal journey and shared, public experience altogether inviting the viewer to a place devoid of limitations.

In interactions with the artist, the founder and creative director of Art Twenty One, Caline Chagoury-Moudaber, host of the solo show, is consumed by the interiority of his lived experiences and how he was able to successfully translate them into a contemporary, futuristic setting that resonates with the viewer.

"His colour blindness inspired the hues in the exhibition; his family lineage of blacksmiths further exalted his love for metal; the sub-themes of magic, freedom and creative expression on the continent echoed the primordial genesis of Yoruba cosmology.

"Future, Past" explores the past, present and future from the perspective of a child who grew up near the river, surrounded by artisans who flourished with an elegance that transcended the mundane. It takes the viewer through an evoked sense of time and place, where time is both real and fictional and the place is the same, and the only thing real is the individual experience of it.

Adedapo Macaulay, a connoisseur of the arts, found himself spellbound by the ethereal beauty of Adenuga's pointillist technique: "His work transcends mere representation," he mused, his gaze fixed upon a portrait of a young boy, "capturing the essence of innocence and wonder with each meticulously placed dot."

As the night wore on, the gallery pulsed with the rhythm of life, a vibrant tapestry woven from the threads of memory and imagination. Against the

backdrop of Adenuga's art, patrons revelled in the joy of camaraderie, sharing stories and laughter as they explored the depths of their collective consciousness.

In the midst of the exhibition, the air thrummed with the rhythm of the Bata drummers, their beats echoing the heartbeat of a nation pulsing with creativity and resilience.