

Against the odds: the quiet triumph of Lagos’s art scene

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In 2017, after a year of studying photography and fine art at Parsons School of Design in New York, Nigerian-born painter **Stephanie Unaeze** had a decision to make. She could choose to stay in the US and pursue a career there. After all, in just one year, she had already shown in two group exhibitions and hosted open studios where curators, art educators, and gallerists had seen her work. There was some promise.

Or she could go back home. The decision rested on where she could draw the most energy and inspiration for her work, and where she could build an international presence. She got on a flight back to Nigeria.

‘This was where I was meant to be,’ says Unaeze. ‘I also felt that I had work to do in Nigeria – that living here would help me tell my authentic story.’



Stephanie Unaeze in her Lagos studio. Photo by Ugochukwu Emebiriogo for Art Basel.

Energetic and inspiring, Lagos certainly is – and not only during Art X, the local art fair that has gathered significant traction in recent years. With independent artists bootstrapping careers to global acclaim, international dealers setting up shop, galleries

opening at increasing rates, and collectors funding residencies and private museums, Lagos is fast-becoming one of the most dynamic art capitals on the continent, catching up with Johannesburg.

What's more, artistic energy here often thrives against the odds. The art industry in the Nigerian capital is developing against a dire economic backdrop and with little help from the government.

'We are finding ways to put ourselves on the map without state funding,' says **Nengi Omuku**, a sculptor and painter based in the city. 'I did a residency in France and it was shocking to me how much is funded by the state. You don't have things like that here, but people are making do.'

'I don't think we are losing anything by not getting state funding,' continues mixed-media artist **Kelani Abass**. 'It inspires people to go out of their way. If you are not expecting anything from anybody, you will work harder.'

Some Nigerian artists find great success at home and abroad, but they often have to do without the traditional markers of career progression: an art school education, strategic gallery associations, or a famous mentor. Painter **Collins Obijiaku**, for instance, went straight from working in obscurity in Nigeria to being represented by renowned Californian gallery Roberts Projects.

This is the energy Unaeze wanted to tap into. And three years after her Lagos touchdown, she feels that the decision has paid off. 'Being here has afforded me the ability to test myself and see what art means to me personally, to see how far I'm willing to take it, to see how creative I can get,' she says.



Kelani Abass in his studio. Photo by Ugochukwu Emebiriado for Art Basel.



Stephanie Unaeze's sketchbook. Photo by Ugochukwu Emebiriado for Art Basel.

Young artists like Unaeze abound in Lagos. Their work tends to be figurative or to tread an experimental line between figuration and abstraction. They are also increasingly audacious with their material, venturing beyond oil and acrylic. After the police murder

of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, when a racial reckoning swept the globe, young Nigerian painters – including **Ekene Emeka-Maduka**, **Tosin Kalejaiye**, and **Oliver Okolo** – pushed forward their perspective on Blackness.

‘In Lagos, the talent is unmatched,’ says **Wunika Mukan**, a longtime cultural event brand strategist turned curator and gallerist, who founded Pacers Gallery in 2020. ‘What is exciting is working with new artists: we are all growing and learning together.’

Older, more established artists such as **Peju Alatise**, **Olu Amoda**, and **Kainebi Osahenye** are also a force to be reckoned with. They are typically art-school trained, often at the Yaba College of Technology, or at the University of Nsukka’s Fine Arts department where celebrated Ghanaian sculptor **El Anatsui** taught for decades. While the market’s current focus appears to be on their younger peers, these established artists have built strong careers – although their works tend to be severely undervalued compared to their contemporaries in the Global North.

While it would seem the industry is increasingly shifting its focus to the young and new, these artists still find a landing pad amongst older collectors and galleries such as **O’Da Art Gallery**, which opened last year to champion mid-career and established artists. Or the **Kó Gallery** which, alongside contemporary artists, shows modern works by the likes of **Ben Enwonwu**, **Demas Nwoko**, and **Obiora Udechukwu**, with an eye towards art history and education. ‘It is important that we focus on the pioneering artists that have shaped Nigerian art and culture,’ says Kó Gallery founder **Kavita Chellaram**.

Non-profit organizations also play a significant role. **The Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA)**, founded by the late great curator **Bisi Silva**, and the **African Artists Foundation (AAF)** are true stalwarts of the Lagos art scene. Since launching in 2007, both have raised money to offer curatorial training and mentorship programs that have served as the foundation for many artists’ careers.

‘CCA and AAF protect the heart and soul of the art ecosystem by elevating the discourse and presenting new ideas,’ says independent curator Ugonna Ibe.

Yet, despite the strength of Lagos’s art scene, artists often still suffer from a lack of visibility – and the discourse lags behind. ‘There is so much to be done,’ Ibe continues. ‘We are not doing a good job of documenting and archiving what we have achieved.’



The dominant narrative about the art scene in Lagos is increasingly being written abroad by journalists, curators, academics, and researchers looking in – rather than by robust local art media and commentators. This lack of reverence for history is a systemic issue in Nigeria. National museums across the country are gathering dust and are deprived of the funding which would allow them to collect modern and contemporary artists and inscribe them in the canon.

Thankfully, things are changing slowly. Recently launched private museums such as the **Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art**, which is named after the collector who founded it, and the government-backed **John Randle Centre** may go some lengths to filling the archival gap. Six hours outside Lagos, the **Edo Museum of West African Art**, due to open in 2025, promises to be a destination museum. It will house hundreds of Benin Bronzes, ivories, and works in wood returned by European and American museums in an ongoing wave of restitution.

But, despite its new energy, the Nigerian art scene at large certainly needs more opportunities for its artists on the ground. Several players are trying to plug that gap, including the newly minted **Guest Artists Space (GAS) Foundation**, created by British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare. While it only formally opened this November, GAS has already been hosting Nigerian and international artists for several months.

There are also a few opportunities in hybrid spaces, which combine commercial and more philanthropic activities. Rele Gallery, for instance, started a foundation and an exhibition program, Young Contemporaries, which enables emerging artists to learn under mentors, and have their works promoted and exhibited in a season-opening show series. The program also offers the chance to be represented by the gallery. Thanks to this project, Rele has developed an enviable roster of artists becoming a gallery of reference in seven short years. In 2021, Rele also opened a second space in Los Angeles, developing a US market for the artists it promotes.

So, despite the challenges, many are choosing to look on the bright side. ‘I love working in Nigeria,’ says artist Omuku. ‘It is not always easy, but I feel most inspired here.’





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Credits for full-bleed images, from top to bottom: 1. A view of Lagos' street, with its emblematic taxi cabs, the danfos. Photo by Ugochukwu Emebiriado for Art Basel. 2. A view of Nengi Omuku's work presented in the Meridians sector at Art Basel Miami Beach 2022 by Pippy Houldsworth Gallery. 3. Artist Ayanfe Olarinde in front of her works. Photo by Ugochukwu Emebiriado for Art Basel. 4. An installation view at Kó Gallery. Photo by Ugochukwu Emebiriado for Art Basel. 5. An installation view at Rele Gallery. Photo by Ugochukwu Emebiriado for Art Basel.