

Ken Nwadiogbu – Fragments of Reality opens for Frieze Week.

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By Mark Westall

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KEN NWADIOGBU, EMPIRE STATE OF MIND, 2023 Oil and Acrylic on Canvas 210 x 150 cm 82 5/8 x 59 in Copyright The Artist

Ken Nwadiogbu – Fragments of Reality opens for Frieze Week at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London Bridge on Saturday 7th October 2023.

A series of figures – rendered in a blazing colour palette of red, orange and yellow – emerge from or descend into textured, abstract backgrounds. These are the personal memories of the London-based, Nigerian artist Ken Nwadiogbu – portraits of ephemeral moments that have burnt themselves into his mind and continue to shape his perspective of the world around him. *Fragments of reality*, Nwadiogbu's first solo exhibition at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, reflects on the artist's experiences of adjusting to life in London, of building a sense of community and longing for home. The exhibition is curated by Dolly Kola-Balogun in collaboration with Retro Africa.

Nwadiogbu arrived in London in 2022, after making the decision to further pursue his artistic studies at the Royal College of Art. It is a decision that has greatly influenced not just his approach to making art, but also his wider sense of self and the ways in which he relates to and understands the world. This latest body of work is drawn from photographs Nwadiogbu has taken in the UK, of his friends, family and other members of the Black immigrant community. Rather than simply recreating the photographic image, however, Nwadiogbu zooms in on specific details, highlighting the vivid emotional residue that endures after a moment has passed.



KEN NWADIOGBU, STRANGER IN LONDON, 2023 Oil and Acrylic on Canvas 70 x 60 cm 27 1/2 x 23 5/8 in Copyright The Artist

He begins by pouring paint onto the canvas, responding to the movement of colour, his psychological state and the rhythm of the music that he plays in the studio, before painting the figure and fragments of contextual information – a metal fence, an escalator, the edge of a mattress – on top of this textured surface in heightened detail. The result is a series of haunting scenes that sit somewhere between reality and dream. The fervent palette of these latest works adds to this effect, simultaneously illuminating specific details and casting the image into a transitional space, which to Nwadiogbu represents ‘the spiritual realm, the side of the world that we don’t fully understand and can’t represent in images or words.’ The warm hues further draw on this idea as well as the aesthetics of

thermographic cameras that record heat energy. 'When a moment has passed, memories become energy, so that even when the visual experience fades, the feeling of it remains and becomes embedded into who we are,' says Nwadiogbu.

Significantly, many of the figures in this latest series are anonymous, with their backs turned to the viewer or their face obscured, as in *Blank Pages*, by an open book. We encounter them in largely intimate, domestic settings and yet, they remain distant and unknowable. This, in part, reflects Nwadiogbu's own experiences of anonymity when he first arrived in London, but it also offers the viewer the freedom to shape the image according to their own understanding of the world. Other paintings feature figures gazing directly at the viewer, their eyes highlighted by dark, cut out circles that appear like spectacles or portals into their soul.

As Nwadiogbu explains:

It's like when you make eye contact with someone on the bus or on a train – in that moment, there's instant life: they become an individual with their own backstory and emotions that you can empathise with and relate to.

In a sense, this is what Nwadiogbu's work is all about: finding and initiating vivid moments of connection that break down social, cultural and political boundaries. His paintings speak specifically to the everyday experience of Black immigrants in the UK, but they also remind us of shared humanity.

Ken Nwadiogbu – Fragments of Reality, 7th October – 25th November, [Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery](#), London

Private View: Saturday 7th of October 2023, 3 – 7pm



Ken Nwadiogbu (b. 1994, Lagos, Nigeria) is a multidisciplinary artist. Nwadiogbu is currently pursuing a master's degree in painting from the Royal College of Art, London. A trained civil engineer, he soon pivoted to fine art, first embracing hyperrealism and charcoal drawing before expanding his creative horizon to more conceptual works and a wider array of techniques. On Nwadiogbu's large canvases, stories superimpose themselves in multiple layers. Mixing together hyperrealism with contemporary elements, he explores grave matters in his colourful conceptual work, inviting us to address altogether black representation and identity, displacement, and socio-political control. Defending an art that can be at once smart and fun, he creates ingenious, politically charged visual illusions that deploy a singular outlook, daring the audience to question their own, for "value lies in the perspective".

Solo Exhibitions include (Upcoming) *Fragments of Reality*, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London, UK (2023); *A Different Perspective*, Retro Africa Gallery, Abuja, Nigeria (2022); *Journey Mercies*, Bomb Factory Art Foundation, London, UK (2021); *UBUNTU*, Thinkspace Projects, Los Angeles, USA (2021); *CONTEMPOREALISM*, BrickLane Gallery, London, UK (2019).

Group Exhibitions include RA Summer Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, London, UK (2023); *Lucid Borders*, Art Exchange, University of Essex, London, UK (2023); *We are Enough*, 193 Gallery, Paris, France (2023); *The Migrant*, Scope Miami Beach, curated by Roger Niyigena Karera, Miami Beach, USA (2022); *Across the Pond*,

Espacio Gallery, London, UK (2022); *Unity*, Volery Gallery, Dubai, UAE (2022); *Freedom Protesters*, Thinkspace Projects, Los Angeles, USA (2022); *Real Life Is Fragile*, Thinkspace Projects, Los Angeles, USA (2021); *Ruth Borchard Self Portrait Collection*, Coventry Cathedral, Coventry, UK (2021); *POW! WOW! The First Decade: From Hawaii To The World*, Bishop Museum, Hawaii, USA (2021); 1-54 African Art Fair, New York, presented by Retro Africa Gallery, USA (2021); Prizm International Art Fair, Miami, presented by Retro African Gallery, USA (2020); *The Cookout: Kinfolk and Other Intimacies*, Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art (MoCADA), New York, USA (2020); 1-54 African Art Fair, New York, presented by Retro African Gallery, USA (2020); Art of Diversity, Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA) studio, London, UK (2020); Monikr International Art Fair, London, presented by Premier Art Solution (2019); *ArtX Lagos*, presented by Artyrama Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria (2019); *LAX-LHR*, Chelsea Sorting Office, London, presented by Thinkspace Project (2019); *LAX-MSY* RedTruck Gallery, Louisiana, presented by Thinkspace Project (2019); *LAX-SFO*, Heron Arts California, presented by Thinkspace Project (2019); *In The Making*, Retro African Gallery, Abuja, Nigeria (2019); *ArtX Lagos*, presented by Artyrama Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria (2018); *Afriuture Exhibition*, Ramati Art Africa & the Commonwealth Africa Summit (2018); Ontario Investment and Trade centre, Toronto, Canada (2018); *Anti-Trump Art Show*, Creative Debuts, London, UK (2018); *Moniker International Art Fair*, NYC, presented by Creative Debuts, London, UK (2018); *Generation Y*, Retro African Gallery, Abuja, Nigeria (2018); *Empowerment*, Creative Debuts, London, UK (2018); Artyrama Art Exhibition, Artyrama Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria (2017); *Finidng Your Identity*, British Council, Abuja, Nigeria (2017); *It's Not Furniture*, Omenka Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria (2017); *Insanity*, Omenka Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria (2016).

Highlights and collections

Nwadiogbu has been awarded the prestigious The Future Awards Africa in recognition of his contributions to the Nigerian arts community. He has collaborated with many esteemed brands including Macmillan Publishers, Martell, and OPPO. A core focus for him is to inspire and encourage young creatives. He does this through public speaking and mentorship, as well as through his creative collaborations.

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