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Kelechi Nwaneri's Contemporary Surrealism



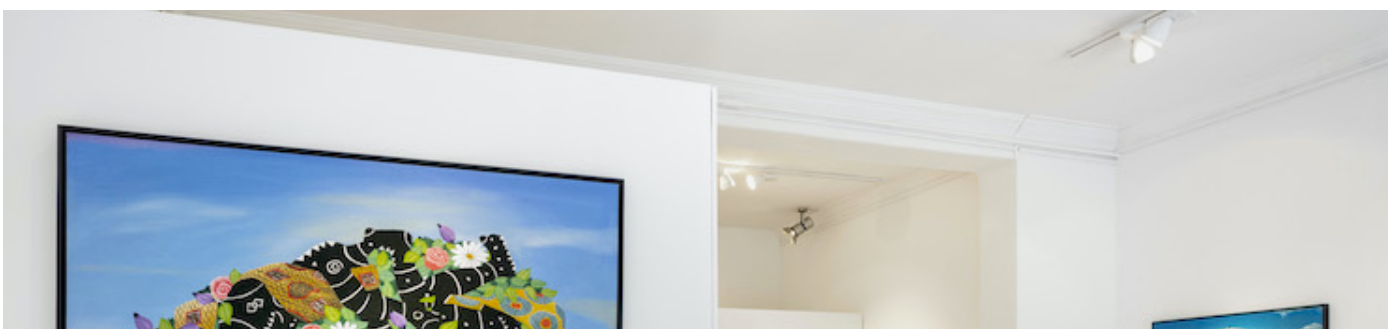


Kelechi Nwaneri, Serenade, 2020. Courtesy EBONY/CURATED

By **PAUL LASTER**, November 2020

Working in an inventive, personal style that he's boldly named Contemporary Surrealism, Nigerian artist Kelechi Nwaneri, whose work is currently on view at **EBONY/CURATED** in Capetown, South Africa, creates beautifully bizarre imagery of fictional figures in landscapes, which seem half-real and half-imagined. Making use of indigenous West African iconography, which he marvelously mixes with psychological scenarios straight out of the history of European Modern Art, Nwaneri constructs colorful, new, dreamlike narratives that magically catch and hold viewers' minds and eyes.

Drawing since he was a child, Nwaneri reluctantly studied agricultural extension in college, but when he realized that he wasn't fully dedicated to a career in science he returned to the thing he knew and loved, art. Without changing his course of academic studies—he graduated with a Bachelor's degree in agricultural extension in 2015 from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka—the soon-to-be artist taught himself to make hyperrealistic pencil drawings that looked as fine as black-and-white photos.



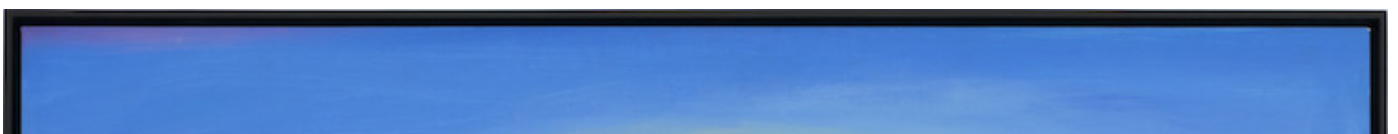


Kelechi Nwaneri, Installation view of Modern Marks at EBONY/CURATED.

“I was astonished at the possibility that a simple pencil could create so much detail in a drawing,” Nwaneri shared by phone from his current art residency in Venice. “I really wanted to learn to draw like that so I taught myself after looking at videos on the Internet.” Developing quickly, he began employing other media, such as acrylics, oil paints and charcoal in his portraits/landscapes, and the art world started to take notice.

His first important group exhibitions came in 2018, when his work was exhibited at a respectable Lagos gallery and in a competition show, sponsored by the Embassy of Spain, in Nigeria’s capital city of Abuja. Shortly thereafter, the artist got his first big breaks—almost simultaneously—when he was named the winner of the Spanish competition, which included an invitation to visit Madrid, and when he landed a spot in group show at one of his favorite Lagos galleries, SMO Contemporary Art, which took place in September 2019.

“At that point I became more convinced of my capabilities,” Nwaneri declared. “Traveling to Madrid, which was my first time outside of Nigeria, and showing at SMO made me more confident.” Two days after the SMO show opened, EBONY/CURATED’s Marc Stanes caught wind of the work, contacted Nwaneri, and the gallery began representing his captivating art, which brings us to *Modern Marks*, the young painter’s much anticipated, first one-person show.





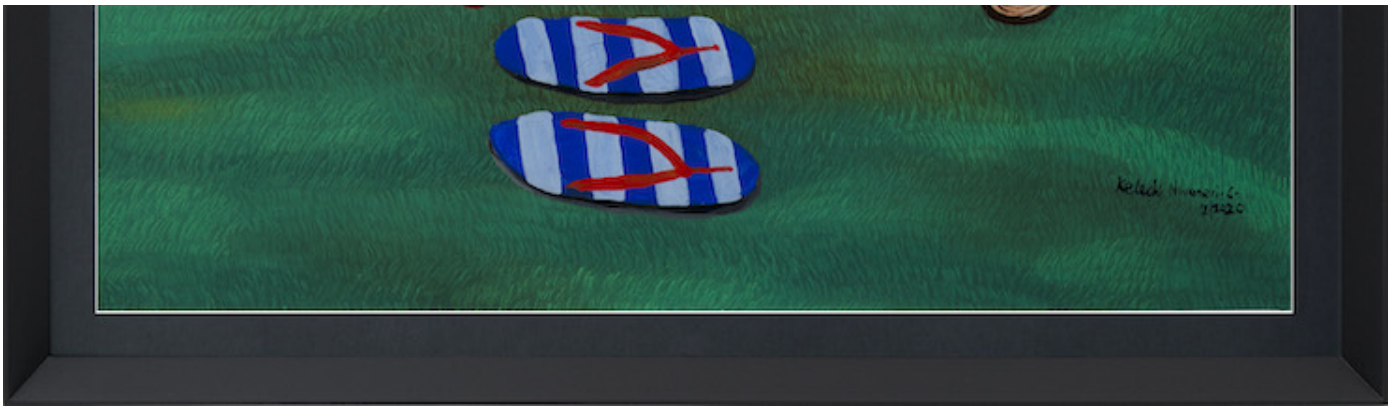
Kelechi Nwaneri, Portrait of a Human Brain, 2020. Courtesy EBONY/CURATED

Presenting new paintings and a fresh series of works on paper, which feature Nwaneri's initial use of pastel, *Modern Marks* invites viewers to join the artist's journey of self-discovery—taking the audience from a broken place of pain to a realm of realized dreams. In the body of work, Nwaneri mines his subconscious—constructing surreal situations for his imaginary subjects, while employing an expressive palette to visualize their existence. Starting with loose sketches, he lets his ideas develop on paper and canvas, allowing each piece to properly mutate into the final finished work.

Several works on paper show a lone black figure marked with tribal scarification

symbols in imaginary landscapes, where mountains are patterned in geometric forms. Satellite dishes, floating square buildings, and wind and broadcast towers dotting the horizon lines and the dramatically colored skies link the works to the current Internet Age. *A broken Place*, which depicts a headless, androgynous figure with animal legs, captures the protagonist blindly beginning the journey after being deserted by a woman, who is heartbreakingly symbolized by an empty, red, high-heeled shoe.

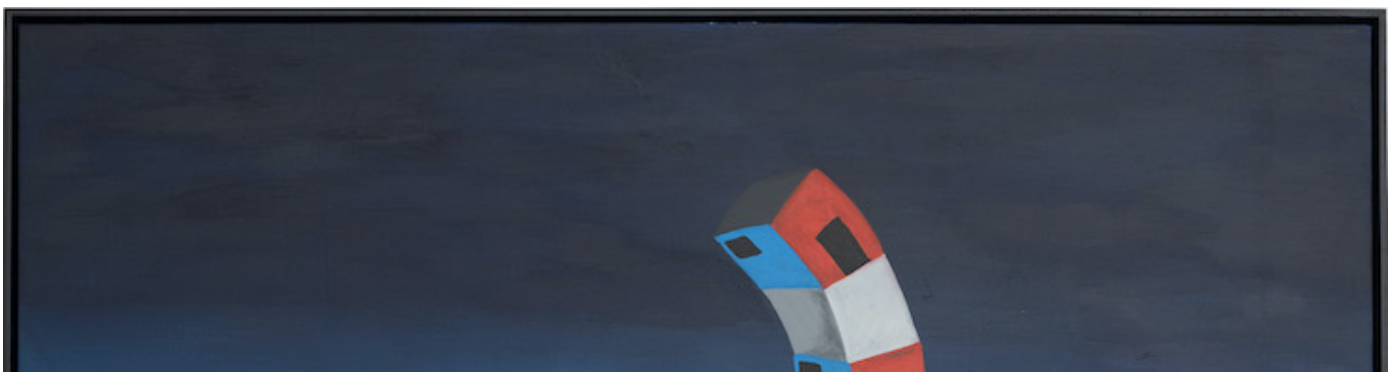




Kelechi Nwaneri, *Retreat & Perseverance*, 2020. Courtesy EBONY/CURATED

Retreat & Perseverance, which portrays another one of the headless characters intently studying a melting book as police tape with the words “Do Not Cross” protects its isolation, is partially inspired by a Salvador Dalí painting, his 1931 masterpiece *The Persistence of Memory*, which famously features soft melting watches in a sublime yet barren landscape. *Black Bird*, meanwhile, takes its title from the eponymous Beatles’ song and brings the idea of letting go of a lost love conveyed in the lyrics “take these broken wings and learn to fly” to life as the scarred figure release a bird from its cage while taking a knee.

Three paintings on canvas—*Portrait of a human eye*, *Portrait of a human brain*, and *Portrait of a human skull*—make use of multiple, scarred, black bodies dreamingly mingled with plants, flowers, and bits of African Batik fabric to create odd, lifelike forms, which evoke the physical parts featured in the titles of the works. The skull conjures further thoughts of Dalí, who made a number of works that fantastically blended figures into skulls, and those notions carry through to the brain, which is improbably propped up by one extended foot, and an eye that floats above a checkered raft at sea to provide what the artist imaginatively envisions as a window through time.





Kelechi Nwaneri, Empty Pockets, Dreams & Helpers, 2020. Courtesy EBONY/CURATED

The painting *Empty pockets, Dreams & Helpers* somewhat sums up the journey through Nwaneri's reflective mind—at least for now. Portraying the headless figure in a striped T-shirt but pant-less—and thus pocket-less—at the base of a suspended staircase supported by symbolic helpers in the form of singular stylish shoes, the piece pays homage to all who have played a part in aiding the artist in achieving his dream. Pausing at the foot of the steps, the artist's avatar takes time to consider climate change and global warming, which he regards as highly important issues, by emphasizing the need for nature along life's path.

Embracing the cultural concept of Afrofuturism by creating a mythical persona that's merged with science fiction, Nwaneri expresses the hope for a new reality through his art. Tapping into the tradition of storytelling, he envisions his dreams as reality by transferring them to paper and canvas. "You have to dream, you really have to dream," he echoed from Venice. "And hope that one day those dreams

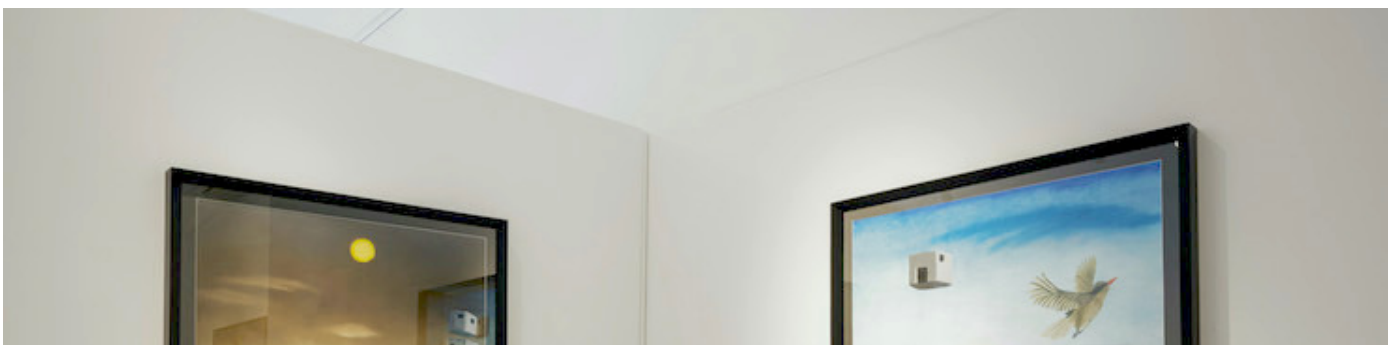
come true.” WM



Kelechi Nwaneri, Fat Boy, 2020. Courtesy EBONY/CURATED



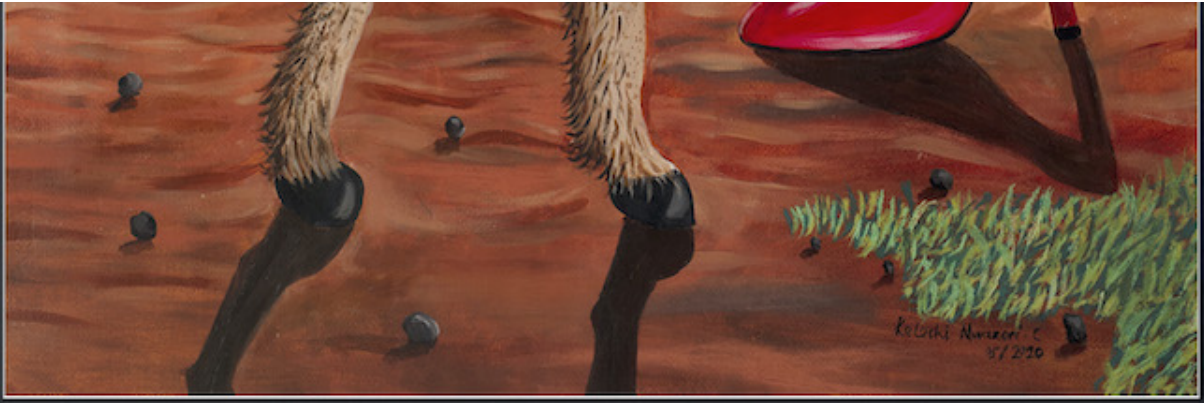
Kelechi Nwaneri, Portrait of a Human Skull, 2020. Courtesy EBONY/CURATED





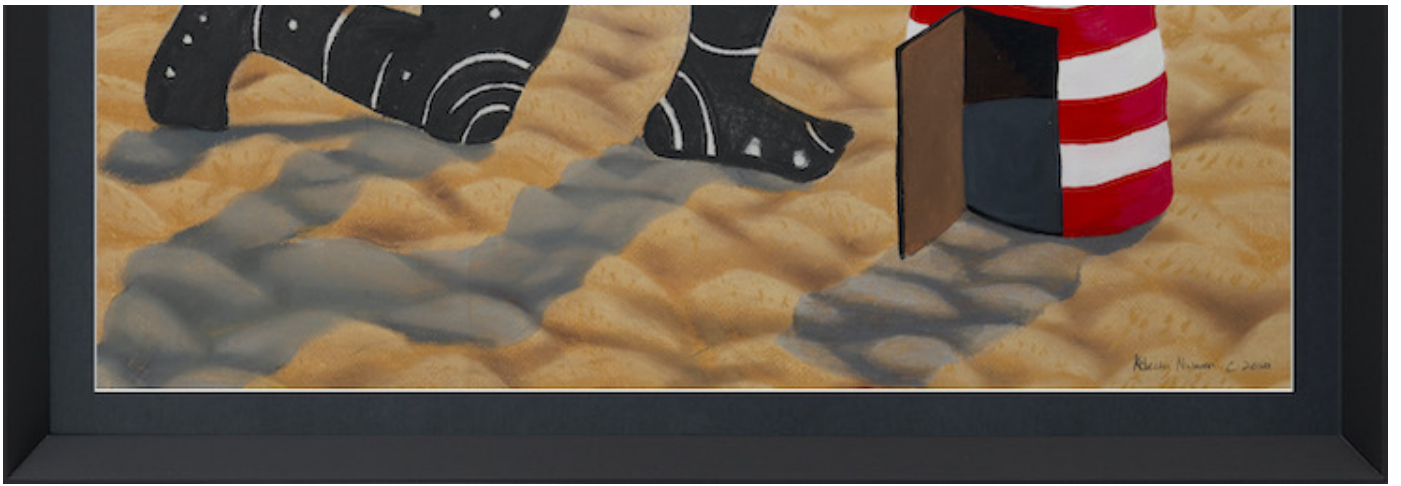
Kelechi Nwaneri, Installation view of Modern Marks at EBONY/CURATED.





Kelechi Nwaneri, A Broken Place, 2020. Courtesy EBONY/CURATED





Kelechi Nwaneri, Black Bird, 2020. Courtesy EBONY/CURATED



Kelechi Nwaneri, Portrait of a Human Eye, 2020. Courtesy EBONY/CURATED

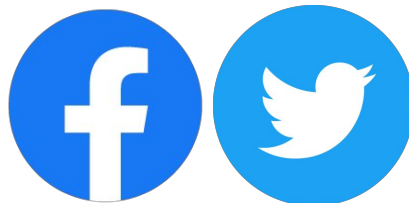




PAUL LASTER

Paul Laster is a writer, editor, curator, artist and lecturer. He's a contributing editor at ArtAsiaPacific and Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art and writer for Time Out New York, Harper's Bazaar Arabia, Galerie Magazine, Sculpture, Art & Object, Cultured, Architectural Digest, Garage, Surface, Ocula, Observer, ArtPulse, Conceptual Fine Arts and Glasstire. He was the founding editor of Arkrush, started The Daily Beast's art section, and was art editor of Russell Simmons' OneWorld Magazine, as well as a curator at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, now MoMA PS1.

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