



# BAZAAR

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the shape  
*of* water

MÖDUPEOLA

PADEGBA





Nigerian artist **Modupeola Fadugba** tackles subjects related to social justice and identity through her dreamy, multimedia oeuvre. *Rebecca Anne Proctor* speaks with the artist about her unsung heroines and the importance of swimming

**D**onning black one-piece bathing suits and hair fashioned into tightly bound ballerina-style buns, a group of female swimmers makes their way into the depths of the sea. Their limbs sway to and fro as they gracefully push against the tides, enacting balletic moves, stretches and twirls as part of their synchronized swimming session. No struggle seems to be present here. The swimmers with their black buns—a detail that signals belonging and unity—seem happy and free. They don't resist the water and its uncertain tides; they elegantly play in the depths, supporting one another as each one attempts a lift, dive or backbend.

Togo-based Nigerian artist Modupeola Fadugba's dreamy *Synchronized Swimmers* series is rife with poetry and metaphorical symbolism. There's no shallow end for Modupeola's swimmers. Her canvases are replete with her signature burnt paper, appearing throughout each work—on a swimmer's leg, arm, face and the water itself—representing, she says, the physical aftermath of the trauma in Rwanda witnessed as a child where she lived just after the genocide. Her figurative works, made in acrylic or ink, use the art of swimming as a metaphor. Modupeola's swimmers immediately please the eye; their dance-like moves are at once touching and uplifting, offering a sense of hope at the same time as they symbolize a fight against socio-economic factors that favour some and not others.





For the first time, the artist has used oil and ink on a piece of paper. 129.5x152.4cm.

Born in 1985 in Lomé, Togo, to UN diplomats, Modupeola was raised in the US and Rwanda for most of her childhood until she moved to the UK for boarding school. She continued her studies in the US where she obtained a BEng Chemical Engineering and an MA in Economics from the University of Delaware, followed by an MA in Education from Harvard University. But Modupeola's interest in art came around the time she was 11 and moved to the UK. "At the prep school I attended I conducted these grand scale research projects through art—it was a subject that could hold my attention for a long time," she remembers. "I was also good at math and chemistry and I thought 'Why would I be an artist when I can be a chemical engineer?' As much as I enjoyed the art I never thought that I could do it full-time as a career." In 2004, as a freshman in college, she had her first exhibition and sold nearly all of her work. "I went back with all this cash but there was a new pressure that was there that I hadn't anticipated—one that almost turned me off from creating art because I wasn't able to do it in my own time and there were these new demands," she says. "I almost shut down entirely." So Modupeola went in the other direction, taking a "hiatus" from her art for about nine years.

She returned to Nigeria several years ago, and it was there that she was inspired once again to paint. She is "rediscovering it from scratch; it really fuels a lot of the content for my work," she says. "I had been working as a development consultant for a girl's education programme teaching numeracy, literacy and business skills to young girls throughout Northern Nigeria. They were girls who had dropped out of school for one reason or another and were hence termed as 'marginalised.'"

## "REDISCOVERING [NIGERIA] FROM SCRATCH: IT REALLY FUELS A LOT OF THE CONTENT FOR MY WORK"

While she found the swimming pools in the US less threatening, it was at a mandatory swimming class in the UK that she overcame her fears. Plunging into the water and proceeding, tentatively at first, with one stroke followed by the next, Modupeola realised that swimming was something she could conquer. Twenty years later, in Ibadan,

Nigeria, Modupeola found herself again at the edge of a pool. She was there with her family and had just decided to become a full-time artist. Her brother was about to dive from the highest platform. Though fearful once again of the water below, with encouragement from her siblings, she dove in. Everyone clapped. The event was symbolic of her decision to give up everything for her art—to take the "plunge" into the depths of uncertainty.

Working with a creative process that involves a mix of media, Modupeola is always open to experimentation, yet incorporates several recurring motifs. One of such is the burnt paper that she uses. "It's about trauma," she says—trauma to the economy and trauma in people's emotions. "Moving to Rwanda as an 11-year-old and driving through the streets and seeing these buildings that were bullet-ridden or bombs that had taken out massive craters in buildings—are images that stick with you." Rwanda is now completely the opposite; the burns that it experienced have healed. "It's [the burning] is also a way of referencing a success story after a trauma."

Modupeola tends to work on several series simultaneously. The ideas come and go. She sketches a lot and writes down copious notes from things she reads and news she sees. "My process is very iterative in the sense that I will start, stop, go back, and burn the paper," she explains.

With her very demanding job, Modupeola recalls waking up at 4am to paint and then rushing to work. "I was consumed by this rhythm for a few months. I was dealing with marginalised girls and trying to empower them economically while I was working on the series *Chief and his Wives*, a [series] that deals with five women coming together and revolting against a man, saying, 'Take back your pearls and your riches and whatever you think you have given us to make us beholden to you in this way.'"

Her need to paint may also be linked to her period at Harvard. "It was a very intimidating time. But Harvard really does instill this idea that you can do anything," she says. What Modupeola previously thought was impossible, she began to see as likely. "Maybe I could be an artist?" she began to ponder. "Instead of deciding I was going to go back [to Nigeria] to pursue a career in education, I just let all the possibilities come and I entertained them." After six months of working for the consulting firm, Modupeola decided to leave her job and dedicate herself entirely to her art.

The theme of water, an ever-present motif in Modupeola's oeuvre, is symbolic of her journey as an artist just as much as it is a reflection on contemporary socio-economic pressures. As a young child growing up, Modupeola was terrified of the sea. The uncertainty of its depths and boundaries made her uneasy and



Black Sea (I) (2017). Acrylic, oil, ink and pencil on burned paper. 129.5x213cm.

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"In burning the paper it is almost like you are trying to decide the best time to stop; you almost don't want to over-work the surface because you still need to expose the burning paper. Once you paint over the burnt paper you cannot get that piece back." The incorporation of burning began largely when she started *Heads and Tails* (2014-17), a series about currency and value. Bold portraits of Nigerian women occupy the spotlight in each coin, their vibrantly rendered abstract colouring and features endows each with personality. The works, with their Latin lettering and numerals, revisit the American dollar bill, the first taste Modupeola had of the US when she emigrated there at the age of five. "The idea was to refer to the currency and depreciation relative to the foreign economies on which we depend on in Nigeria," she says. "In 2014, the Naira was 150 to the dollar, it was around 500 to the dollar last year, and is now at 350. An economy like Nigeria's depends largely on Western and foreign markets to do business, particularly when it comes to oil and exportation and importation, and it is not the smartest way to structure your economy." The works beg the question: What are we building our values on—economically and more generally?



Moreover, the women in Modupeola's paintings are the unsung heroines of today's world. "In *Heads or Tails* I am also replacing what is normally male portraiture in male dominated societies with women who look like myself and my sister." Modupeola's protagonists are women who don't give up, they keep swimming against adversity at all costs and not for individual empowerment but to help others. Modupeola recently made a work honouring the late Dr Stella Adadevoh, responsible for curbing the spread of Ebola in Nigeria in 2014, who died after contracting the disease herself. Several museums in the US are currently in talks about acquiring the work.

The water in Modupeola's work presents challenges connotations. It is also symbolic of a memory that permeates the African conscious: the slave trade. It was water that brought the slaves from the continent to the new world. Water in this sense should be something feared, resisted, and

regarded cautiously. And perhaps it still is by many to this day. "People don't learn to swim, there is often a fear of water for black and African communities," she says.

## Dear Young Artist,

Before you dive into the deep end, I should tell you a few things: Firstly, there is no shallow end. **Tread slowly.** If no one has taught you to swim, you must quickly learn how to learn. Go with the flow and gradually, you will find your own pace. Young artist, do you see that red ball in the corner? Yes, that big red one, there. Your very survival depends on it, but you must ignore it at first. Or at least pretend to. My young artist, all adults pretend. **Ignore the ball.** That is the first rule. You see, young artist, rich people are quite fond of swimming pools. They will come here from time to time to watch you swim, bearing big red shiny red balls. If you can manage it, put on a small performance for their pleasure. Do a little dance. Twirl. But don't get carried away. Remember the first rule. [...]



The letter was juxtaposed against the *Tagged* series, which reveals swimmers competing for a big red ball in a shiny pool often coloured black with touches of gold. While more lavish in depiction, the waters in this series are less calm. They signal the fierce nature of the women as they forge through the water after the red ball—itself symbolic of the red sticker placed on a work in a show after it is sold. As they struggle back and forth, pushing over one another, the waters take on an almost sinister—yet still appealing—quality. The titles of these works, such as *Buy My Lot/Marry Me Next*, *Women and Children*, *First and The Race*, portray the pool as a place for struggle. Here the women are desperate to survive and to win. The depictions are far away from the calming waters and sense of unity rendered in *Synchronized Swimmers*. But as Modupeola says in her letter: "Go with the flow and gradually, you will find your own pace." She doesn't encourage the swimmers to go after the red ball—one must at first transcend the struggle in order to conquer the race.

"You are the artist, you are the source, without you there is nothing else," says Modupeola, seemingly coaching the swimmers as she refers to Mutu's advice to young artists. "The artist must recognize their value in the food chain of it all and insist on their distinct role. The letter gave me a lot of courage because you do feel that you are always standing up

**"YOU ARE THE ARTIST, YOU ARE THE SOURCE. WITHOUT YOU THERE IS NOTHING ELSE"**

and advocating for your value as a creator." In her *Dear Young Artist* series (2016), she gives the same advice to the aspiring artist but through haunting visual forms. The women in these paintings are positioned in more contemplative stances, taking a pause at the pool and looking behind at a red ball calmly floating in the water.

Surely, it is hard to trust; it is hard to take a plunge into that sea after a traumatic past—be it generations ago or yesterday. In *Synchronized Swimmers*, Modupeola offers us a soft call to action. She gives us—everyone—the proposition for change. Don't give up, she tells us, continue on your journey, look back only when useful, work together and don't look too much at the red ball. Give swimming a chance. Let it flow and then you will not fear the depths below. You'll never regret taking the plunge. ■

Modupeola Fadiugba will exhibit a new body of works at Art Dubai with Gallery 1957. [gallery1957.com](http://gallery1957.com)