

After lockdown, Chukwuma takes Dance of Spirit to Berlin

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'Mirror Mirror' by Gerald Chukwuma (mixed media, 198.1 x 203.2).

Native dance, no doubt, is a common theme in visual trajectory of Nigeria, but the individual artist's creative depth makes much difference, so confirmed Gerald Chukwuma's dancers on panels.

From three realms, the artist generates, assembles and displays his thoughts on the dance theme. Based in Lagos, Chukwuma engages native dancers, right in their Southeast Nigeria; returns to base for the studio works in chiselling, cutting, nailing, burning, painting of woods and takes the assembled sculptural panels of dancers to Europe for exhibition.

The show titled, Ikwokirikwo the Dance of Spirit, started showing at the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Berlin, on May 1.

The exhibition, which ends June 13, 2020, is among the first set of events that opened in Germany after the lifting of COVID-19 lockdown. For Chukwuma and the gallery, it's been quite a recent, but growing history of working relationship that started few years ago. KH and Accra, Ghana-based Gallery 1957, had shown Chukwuma in a group exhibition titled, Kubatana, at Vestfossen Museum, Norway.

From the battle for the soul of contemporary Nigerian contents, Chukwuma has emerged with an identity of coalescing sculptural and painterly textures. The artist's choice of changing the traditional canvas narrative into panels is not exactly unique to his art; quite a number of artists in Nigeria seemed to have jumped into the panel art

train made popular by Emeritus Prof. El Anataui. However, Chukwuma, with his ongoing show is lifting the panel art identity, perhaps, spreading it wider and faster, consistently too.

For his current show, the artist implores bold figurative contents in diverse flow with backgrounds of shades and lights. Among such works is, *Blue Moon*, depicting four dancers, each rendered in either a blend against the background or protrusion. Spiced with native Igbo signs and motifs known as *uli*, the figures emit ecstasy in spiritual dance steps.

Uneven edges of assembled panels in an even coalesced single piece, is perhaps, one of the interesting features of Chukwuma's panel technique or medium of sculptural rendition. The artist, in the works, generates diversity among the seemingly identical pieces.

From *Eke Anyanwu*, a more colourful piece with only the bottom in uneven panels; to *Elewe Ukwu* and *Women Rule The World*, in subtly rough edges of the entire panels; as well as *Mirror Mirror*, another combination of uneven and even edges, Chukwuma's *Ikwokirikwo the Dance of Spirit*, emits energy of sculptural depth in an assemblage of painterly texture.

His technique and style go beyond blurring the line between the two basic media, but also escalates the energy of identity crisis in contemporary contents of painting and sculpture.

In thematic native value context, the artist revisits tradition of the people who are deep in religion and rituals. "The *Ikwokirikwo* is a form of communication — culture, religion, ritual and invocation rolled into one," Chukwuma's Artist Statement explained. "I spent many hours talking to dancers who are currently in their 80s and 90s; for them, it's dance as a bridge to the ecstatic."

Sharing his work process in creating the exhibits, the artist said he had to go on visits to see the dancers in action and "enter that same state of elevated consciousness," enjoyed by the women. Perhaps some documentary in written forms from the past, on the dance tradition would have been of help in understanding the trajectory of the tradition. None of such existed, Chukwuma noted.

"During all the time I spent with them, I never saw a single written document." He imagined how words would have captured the dance, particularly in "specific movements of the body," supposedly built "over the centuries." Whatever such damage caused in lack of documenting events, his art, he assured, can repair, and "perform what the spirit feels – to invoke what the dancers desire."

In its curatorial statement, KH Gallery noted how Chukwuma's "spiralling figures draw the viewer into their dance, flashes of colour" in elevation. The artist's *uli* inspiration, KH argued, "becomes not merely transient, but transcendent."

Excerpts from the curatorial note: “For many years, Chukwuma’s work has drawn inspiration from uli art. A gift from Awa, Goddess of earth, these patterns and designs are traditionally applied to women’s bodies or the walls of a house, disappearing after a few days or when rain arrives to wash them away.

“Standing before Chukwuma’s latest creations, the viewer can only marvel at the combination of technical mastery and courage required to hold so many opposing forces in balance – and gratefully accept his invitation to join their eternal dance.”

Late last year, Chukwuma joined Duke Asidere, Rom Isichei, Chidi Kwubiri, Adewale Alimi and Suraj Adekola as poster-face of art from Africa, in the Middle East. The artists’ exhibition titled, *The Journey into Contemporary African Art*, featured as part of Beirut Art Week 2019.

In 2016, Chukwuma’s visual gospel of peace was shown as *People’s Paradise*, a solo exhibition organised by SMO Contemporary at Temple Muse, Victoria Island, Lagos.