

Slade to Zaria // Blog

'If you are of the camp that wants to keep the art world an exclusive club, then look away now'

Silos are tight in the arts, but here's how musicians, artists and writers and can work together to bring in new audiences

Chibundu Onuzo

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Slade to Zaria

Slade to Zaria, which refers to the prominent art schools in London and Nigeria, is a column by Chibundu Onuzo, a novelist and fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Every month in The Art Newspaper she shares her reflections on the contemporary art world.



In October 2020, I visited the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery to meet the artist Nengi Omuku and to see *Gathering* her debut solo exhibition in London. The works, which reflected on the communal nature of Nigerian life, were powerful, affecting and unusual. Omuku paints on sanyan, a vintage handwoven silk fabric, passed down as an heirloom in south western Nigeria. The images created, had both a contemporary and timeless quality to them.

It was our first meeting and we fell into talking about future plans. She spoke of her forthcoming exhibitions and I spoke of my plan to release a single, *Good Soil*, with my third novel, *Sankofa* [↗](#) (Little, Brown Book Group, £15.79 hb). I was calling it a book soundtrack and my thinking was, if films had soundtracks, then books could too.

“I’m looking for somewhere to shoot the music video,” I said to Nengi.

The Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery is worth a visit for the architecture alone. Formerly the home of artist Andrew Logan, every detail, down to the bathroom tiles, is stamped with his personality. I looked around at the spiral staircase, the glass roof that filled the space with light, the rubber plant that grew over ten feet high and lent a tropical feel in the heart of London.

“Do you think, possibly, maybe, perhaps...” I trailed off. Fortune favours the bold, I reminded myself. “Do you think I could shoot my video here?”

“That sounds amazing!” Nengi exclaimed. “I’ll ask Kristin [the gallery owner].”

Not only was Kristin Hjellegjerde keen, she also knew exactly which artist in her roster would fit the project. In *Good Soil*, I sing about the rich history and ancestry of Africa. The Nigerian artist [Gerald Chukwuma](#) [↗](#) also reflects on these ideas in his art. His wooden panels hark back to the traditional medium that African artists have used for centuries but his treatment of the material is new and exciting. By incorporating found materials into the work, each piece becomes a cyborg of painstaking hand labour and mass-produced machine parts. His intricate carvings bring to mind simultaneously ancient uli designs and modern computer script. In Chukwuma’s work, Africa is both the cradle of humanity and a site of innovation for the future.

Of the 50 cast and crew members, only a handful had visited the gallery before. They were stunned by the space and by the work on display. The video features a wide range of black excellence: from the Olympian Christine Ohuruogu, to the poet and playwright Inua Ellams, to the comedian Eddie Kadi, to the publishing legends Margaret Busby and Ellah Allfrey. I was glad to be able to introduce them to the gallery and to Chukwuma’s work.



A still from Good Soil by Chibundu Onuzo

Every few months or so, there is a think-piece in an art publication, where the writer wonders how the art world can be more open and how it can engage with new audiences. Every few months or so, there is also a piece where the author bemoans how fast the art world is changing. The author longs for the time where the art world was smaller and cosier and everyone knew everyone.

If you are of the camp that wants to keep the art world an exclusive club, then look away now. But if you do want to see the art world expand to welcome new viewers, new collectors, new patrons, then one way is for galleries and museums to be open to cross disciplinary collaborations like my music video.

The fact is that artists never make work in isolation. [Frank Bowling has spoken recently](#) of the creative ferment of 1960s New York where he was surrounded by “artists, writers, theatre people”. Painters are often inspired by writers. Writers are often inspired by film makers. Film makers are often inspired by musicians and yet when the work is presented to the world, it is presented in silos. Writers over there. Musicians over there. Whatever you do, DON’T MIX.

Yet we all stand to gain from these collaborations. We can pool audiences and increase the reach and spread of our work. Book and music lovers may find Chukwuma’s art through my single and art lovers may find my books and music through Chukwuma’s art.

The arts in general would also benefit from more collaboration. Arts funding is often the first to be targeted when the government is drawing up spending cuts because even though the creative industries employ thousands and generate billions, each discipline often operates in isolation.

Shooting the *Good Soil* music video in the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery was a wonderful experience. And what was most wonderful was that it confirmed my belief that the appreciation of art is not just for a select group of cognoscenti. As I watched my two-year-old niece, look up in wonder at Chukwuma’s pieces, I said to myself, art transcends.

Read more from Chibundu's Slade to Zaria series [here](#).

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