



Elegant Urban Decay

AN EXHIBITION BY NYEMIKE ONWUKA

Foreward

arc Gallery is delighted to present 'Elegant Urban Decay': an exhibition of recent works by Nyemike Onwuka. This exhibition is also particularly special as it makes the start of our 2010 programme in celebration of Nigeria's 50th Independence anniversary, Nigeria 50: Art of Nation. Nyemike Onwuka is one of the most promising young talents to emerge on the Nigerian art scene in recent years.

Nyemike is a fiercely passionate artist who has lived and breathed art since childhood and his experimental use of media and effects is rousing in its ingenuity. Nyemike's creative valour is also manifested in his constant pushing of his artistic boundaries and his consistent strive to produce work fitting of what is already an oeuvre of such high calibre. Although for many years arguably relegated to the margins of the global art scene, there is a current global upsurge and seemingly greater awareness/appreciation of modern and contemporary African art.

Whilst it is precisely because of this upsurge that the golden opportunity to producing this exhibition has arisen, it is arc's ultimate hope that our show will play a key role in advancing this new awareness even further, bringing the pleasure and appreciation of contemporary African artwork to an

ever wider audience. On behalf of all at arc, I therefore warmly welcome you to our exhibition and encourage you to delight in the visual feast we have to offer you.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank those who have been working determinedly in preparation for this exhibition. Special thanks to all the arc staff; but especially to Christopher, Jekil and Giovanni; to Jean Joseph and Naomi Ray and to all arc interns past and present for their participation. I would also like to extend a warm thank you to Natalya and the NLPC team, and last but by no means least, to Nyemike himself for his time, originality, and consummate talent.

John Egbo
arc artistic Director

Cover:
"The Triumph of Dignity"
(*Troupe series*), 2009
Mixed media, 122 cm x 152 cm

Right image:
Cosmic Axis, 2010
Mixed media
(lip liner, eye pencil, oil colour, oil bar)
122 cm x 152 cm





Nyemike Onwuka

Simply put, my perception of the world is that it is like a great stage, with phenomenon of qualities or attributes that range from beauty to decay. My art tries to fuse these qualities together by transmuting the viewer's observation back and forth between the two realms. In other words, I aim to combine the beauty of the subject with a sense of urban decay that is represented by my use of rustic technique and choice of media. The purpose of which is to portray the beauty of the subject matter in it's naturally fragmented setting of an increasingly ugly decaying world, without over-exaggerate scenic details. This is perhaps most evident in my paintings of women, in which I always posture the model in such a way that it suggests an elegance for the subject that acts as a statement of human resilience against the inevitable decay of our lives, environment and society. My choice of media is largely influenced by the desire to experiment and discover material connections to the broader themes dealt with by my work, in this case feminine splendour and the artificial intensification of beauty.



Nkwado (preparation series), 2010
Mixed media
122 cm x 152 cm

Nyemike Onwuka

Opposite page:

The 7th Step, 2010

Mixed media (lip liner, eye pencil, oil colour, oil bar, mat lacquer),

122 cm x 152 cm

Elegant Urban Decay

The work of Nyemike Onwuka is influenced by notions of both beauty and environmental decomposition as conflicting phenomena. In this exhibition, these are fused together to create what he refers to as 'elegant urban decay': a style achieved largely by shifting the viewer's attention back and forth between the two extremes - simultaneously demanding a discordant observation from the viewer.

Onwuka's choice of mixed media – oil and latex combined with cosmetics; lip liner and eye pencils express his belief in the relationship between art and the alchemy of materials. As the works brought together for this exhibition clearly demonstrate, women are a prominent subject-matter in Onwuka's paintings. What is particularly interesting about his images of female figures is that there exists a disjunction between, on one hand, the attractive subject and, on the other, artistic techniques that are not conventionally associated with beauty. For example, in works such as *The Triumph of*

Dignity, and *'Metamorphosis'* Onwuka's traditionally beautiful and elegant feminine bodies, are juxtaposed with a certain brashness and rusticity of brushstroke. Splotches of dark paint strewn across the surface and even, in parts, the destruction and burnishing of the painted image to reveal the canvas underneath, imitating a portrait ravaged by time and the external environment.

In *'Metamorphosis'* the woman appears to be in a blissful resilience - her beauty accentuated against a naturally fragmented and decaying world, suggesting the passing of time between carefree youthfulness and the relinquishing of it.

Opposite page:
Metamorphosis, 2010,
Mixed media
76 cm x 137 cm





Urban decay, however, is not limited to the external environment, and thus Onwuka's work engages with notions of decay on multiple levels. As such, his experimental use of cosmetics in these mixed media works such as, 'Just before the Dance' or the contemplative 'In the Realm of the Senses', is highly significant with regards to his exploration of the internal, bodily decay.

In current times there is pressure upon women in all cultures that, the gentle application of cosmetics, graduating to the painful extremities associated with reconstructing of body - irrespective of risk, is a prerequisite to beauty. Indeed, one could contend that the utilisation of makeup and other beauty products in the creation of these works makes reference to the striving for elegance and amplification of beauty that is one particular stratagem in the eternal battle against the slowly, but continually perishing adult body. The viewer and Onwuka too, as artist, represent the global beholder of a woman's beauty – in this context - sensuous African female forms.

He expands on this theme by posturing his female figures in such a way that it acts as a deliberate statement of human vigour and resilience in the face of decay in all its various forms. This is particularly manifest in his series of paintings depicting Nigerian troupe dancers in which both the elegant fluidity of the dancers' movements and their facial expressions of delight suggest the act of dancing as triumphing over the austere, uninviting and fragmented environment alluded to by the eroded canvas.

Opposite page:
In the Realm of the Senses, 2009,
Mixed media
91 cm x 122 cm

Throughout his works Onwuka incorporates issues of storytelling and communication. The perceived interaction of masses brought together in light, shade and use of rustic colour – which Onwuka incarnates par excellence in his celebration of maternal pride, 'Aju' – endow his paintings with a strong narrative element without the use of spoken or written words.

This sense of narrative is again inextricably bound up with the overarching context of the Onwuka's preoccupation with the- beauty/decay binary. For example, a work such as *'Just before the Dance'*, as the title of the work makes explicit, performs a dextrous balancing act between the eternality of beauty as an abstract concept and an intense interest in the fleeting and the ephemeral. In other words, that beauty not only exists in the outward performance of the dancer herself, but also in that private, short-lived, transitory stage of modification that precedes it.

Writers:

Christopher Yiannitsaros
Researcher/Writer; arc Gallery

Jean Joseph
Artist/Curator; arc Gallery

Opposite page:
Just before the Dance, 2010
Mixed media
122 cm x 152 cm



Inspired by the artist's stepmother who was a member of a local dance troupe, *'Just before the Dance'* depicts a troupe dancer making adjustments to her attire as part of her final preparations before a performance. As a child, Onwuka gained great insight into the painstaking time and effort that went into a single performance.

Patches of burnished paintwork and random splotches of dark brown paint strewn across the middle section of the canvas further suggest that 'beauty' and 'perfection' is not necessarily the same thing. In other words, suggesting that 'perfection' is a process that can never fully be taken to completion.



Transition, 2010,
Mixed media (lip liner, eye pencil, oil colour, oil bar, mat lacquer)
122 cm x 152 cm



One Take, No Rehearsal, 2010

Mixed media

107 cm x 122 cm

Biography



Name Nyemike Onwuka
Date of Birth 28 October 1972
Place Lagos
Nationality Nigerian

Education
2007 – 2008
Witswatersrand University
Johannesburg
South Africa PG
Character Animation.

2000 – 2002
Federal Polytechnic Auchi. H N D,
Painting Major

1996 – 1998
Federal Polytechnic Auchi O N D,
General Art.

Solo Exhibition

2008 *“Lines and Forms”*
Sachs Gallery Lagos Nigeria.

Joint Exhibition

2006 *“Moment of Truth”*
Jenny’s Café, The Palms, Lagos Nigeria.

Selected Group Exhibitions

2009 *“Art-renaissance”*
Lagos Motor Boat Club, Lagos Nigeria.

2006 *“A Ray of Masters”*
Pan African University, Lagos Nigeria.

2004 *“Nigerian Passage”*
Promenade Gallery, London UK.

2004 *“5th Biannual”* Exhibition
(P.A.C.A) Enugu. Nigeria.

2003 *“Homage to Asele”*
National Museum Onikan, Lagos
Nigeria.

2002
“Treasures of Time”
Pendulum Art Gallery, Lagos Nigeria.

2001
“Dreams” Didi Museum, Lagos Nigeria.

Right image:
Dance of the Masquerade, 2010
Mixed media
122 cm x 153 cm



Catalogue of the salon exhibition
'Elegant Urban Decay',
By Nyemike Onwuka
21 - 26 May, 2010 at the arc Gallery

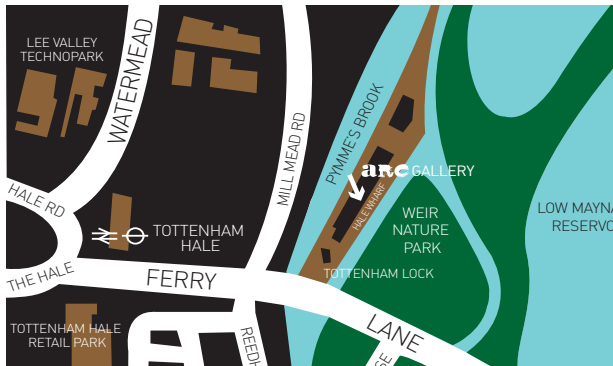
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Concept and design: John Egbo and Nyemike Onwuka
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Directions

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Buses to Tottenham:
41, 192, 230, 123

Turn left from station and walk
up Ferry Lane. Continue past
the lights and turn left at Heron
House into Hale Wharf. Access is
at the pontoon gate.