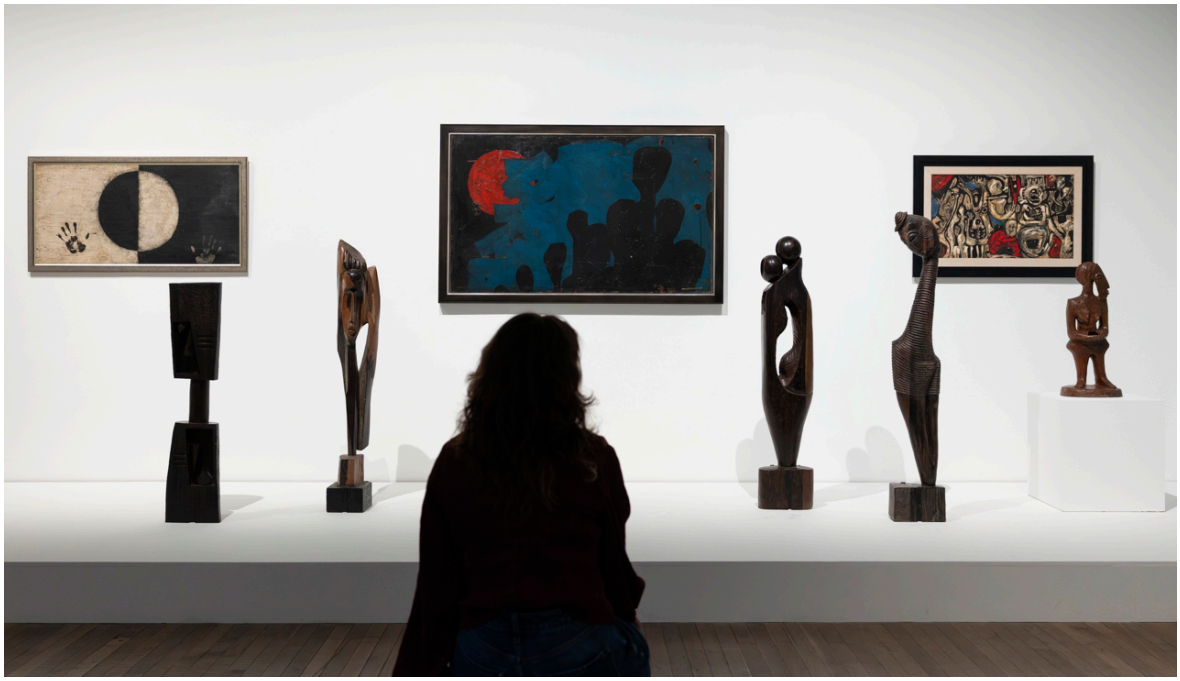
An Interview with Osei Bonsu

Akin Oladimeji

Osei Bonsu is a British-Ghanaian curator, writer and art historian who has made a significant impact at London's Tate Modern, particularly with his work on the global programme focusing on Africa and the African diaspora. He joined Tate as the Curator of International Art in 2019, published *African Art Now: 50 Pioneers Defining African Art for the Twenty-First Century* in 2022, and was promoted to Jorge M Pérez Senior Curator of International Art, Africa and Diaspora in 2025. Bonsu has been involved in various projects that delve into transnational art histories, working with museums, galleries and private collectors around the world. At Tate, he has been instrumental in leading exhibitions, acquisitions and developing the collection to enhance representation of African and diasporic artists. For the 'Nigerian Modernism' exhibition at Tate Modern (8 October 2025 – 10 May 2026) he spent a month in Nigeria, received research help and an essay in the exhibition catalogue from Dr Bea Gassmann de Sousa, and consulted Nigerian artists Ndidi Dike and Dele Jegede as well as Sylvester Ogbechie, a Nigerian-American art historian and curator. Bonsu and I had our phone conversation on 2 December 2025. It has been lightly edited here for clarity and details.

Akin Oladimeji: My first question is the impetus to the 'Nigerian Modernism' show. Why this? Why now?

Osei Bonsu: Nigeria has a deeply storied artistic tradition, which dates back many centuries, but for the particular premise of this exhibition we wanted to explore the development of Nigerian art during the twentieth century. This was the period during which Nigeria gained national independence, but it was also the period in which it was under British indirect rule, which lasted from 1914 until 1960. Looking across that period in Nigeria in the twentieth century, one is able to examine the various schools, art movements and artistic practices that were forged either in direct response to the conditions of coloniality or as a kind of artistic cultural resistance. Art was also a means of celebrating the euphoria of independence all the way through to the period of the Nigerian Civil War from 1967–1970, during which time much of the euphoria around

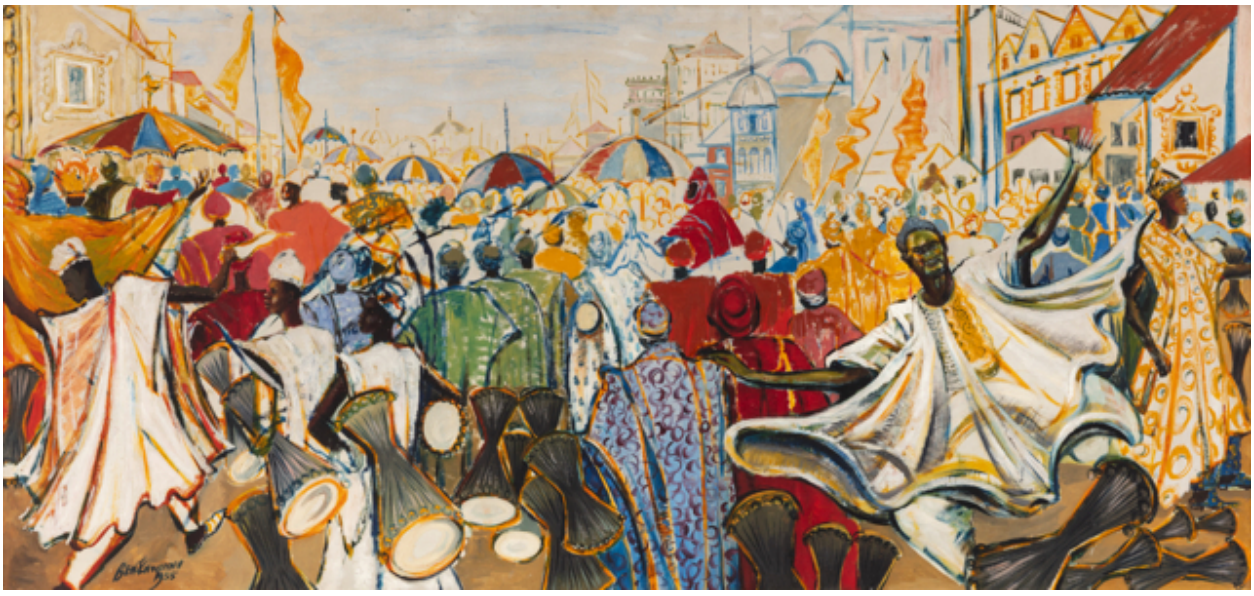


Installation view of 'Nigerian Modernism' at Tate Modern, London, 8 October 2025 – 10 May 2026, image courtesy of Tate Photography (Jai Monaghan)

independence and the kind of hopes for a new nation were challenged by the rise of ethnic tensions and specifically the marginalisation of the Igbo community. So with that, the exhibition tries to look at the various ways in which artists have intercepted these larger ideas of how Nigerian artistic and cultural heritage has been shaped, but also the ways in which their work speaks to moments of technical and artistic innovation and captures the kind of multireligious, multiethnic character of Nigeria as a nation. It thinks through the complex ways in which artists are constantly fighting not only for, you could say, a kind of pan-African vision of independence but also for an idea of artistic independence, the right for their practices to be as deeply embedded in European artistic traditions as they are responsive to indigenous Nigerian traditions, and that those things, in a way, are part and parcel of what makes Nigerian cultural heritage so rich. So that, in a nutshell, is everything that the exhibition is exploring and why it felt like an urgent story to tell.

AO: I love the first room in the Tate exhibition, the one focused on Ben Enwonwu, especially that sculptural part showing the angels in a procession on the plinth. But I did think there was a curious display strategy because Afi Ekong's work is squeezed in-between Enwonwu and Gerard Sekoto, two male artists.

OB: There are very few surviving examples of works by Afi Ekong. That work comes from Fisk University, which, I believe, holds a handful of works by the artist. She's an artist who practised predominantly as a gallerist and as a broadcaster throughout her life. At one point she also worked with Ben Enwonwu; and she was a model for his bust of her, which is now part of the Royal



Ben Enwonwu, *The Durbar of Eid-ul-Fitr, Kano, Nigeria,* 1955, oil on canvas, 86 x 183 cm, courtesy of the Ben Enwonwu Foundation and a private collection

Collection. That work is also in the exhibition. And actually, one of the things the exhibition does is mention that the portrait that you're seeing is of an artist whose work is nearby, so even though her work is not given a dedicated space within the exhibition, it is very much brought within the context of Enwonwu's artistic networks and collaborations during that period. That room, for instance, also includes works by Jacob Epstein and Gerard Sekoto – all of whom played a role in shaping Enwonwu's artistic consciousness. And it was our view that Afi Ekong should play a pivotal role, even though relatively little is known about her work, and you can see there are very few examples of her work to draw upon.

AO: It was wonderful seeing Susanne Wenger's *adire* works in the flesh as I had only read about them.[1] But it would have been great also to get a part of the story or link to one so we could know when she arrived in Nigeria from Austria, why she stayed, how she became part and parcel of Oshogbo by becoming an Àdùnní Olórìṣà.[2] Is there a reason why we aren't provided with that?

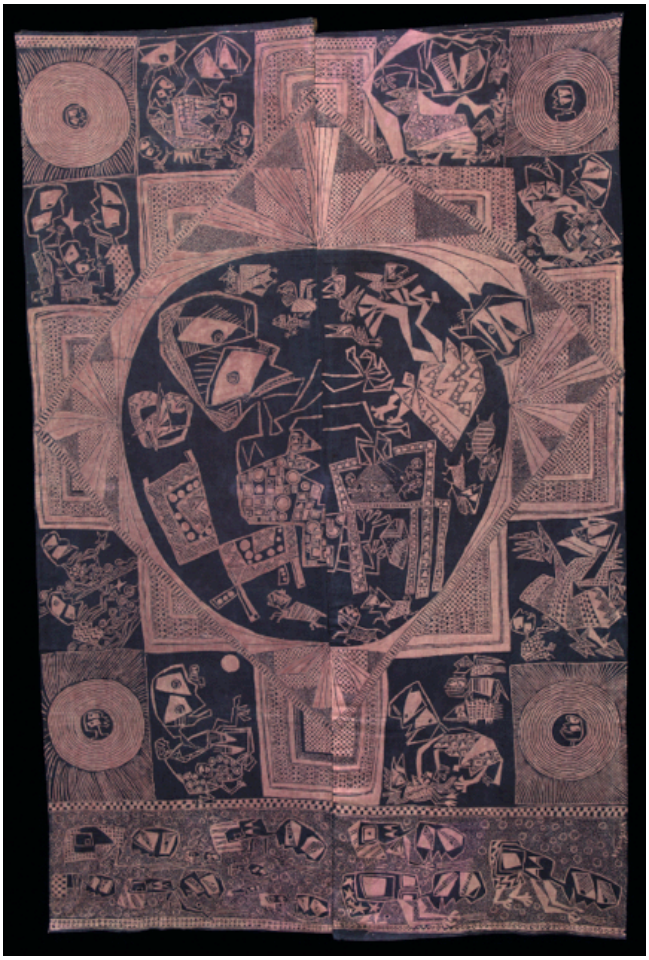
OB: That section focuses on the Grove itself.[3] Susanne Wenger dedicated her life to the preservation of Oshogbo and in fact, her practice was a form of Orisha worship. It was a form of ritual practice that had to do with communing with the ancestors, with the gods, obviously with the Orishas that she was devoted to. Focusing on her biography would have been slightly strange

[1] See 'Who was Susanne Wenger / Àdùnní Olórìṣà?' on Google Arts and Culture: https://artsandculture.google.com/story/IAXBGVfmA6LkIA

[2] A Yoruba title which means 'A devotee of the deities who is favoured by them'.

[3] The Osun-Oshogbo Sacred Grove is a forested area featuring shrines and sanctuaries dedicated to Osun, a Yoruba river deity; Oshogbo is a town in Osun State, southwestern Nigeria.

considering that everything she did was in the service of this spiritual practice of the artists that she convened, including Buraimo Gbadamosi and Adebisi Akanji who were working alongside her to preserve the Grove. So even though Susanne Wenger is perhaps the most famous artist to emerge from the New Sacred Art movement, she wasn't the only one. There were actually, I believe, over twenty artists involved with the Grove and we're only showing four in the exhibition, which in and of itself was not an omission, but in fact, because much of the work they made was made at the site of the Grove, either as shrine-like objects or as objects that were intended to be made as offerings to the deities, it didn't feel appropriate to include works that were not necessarily appropriate for museum display context. That's why we include a large-scale image of the Grove itself, to transport people to that place, but also to remind people that this is a physical site, this is a ritual site that has a deep and profound spiritual meaning, and that Susanne Wenger was responsible for taking care of that Grove, but the spiritual practice of Orisha worship and the Yoruba pantheon of gods associated with that form of worship far predates her arrival in Nigeria in the 1950s.



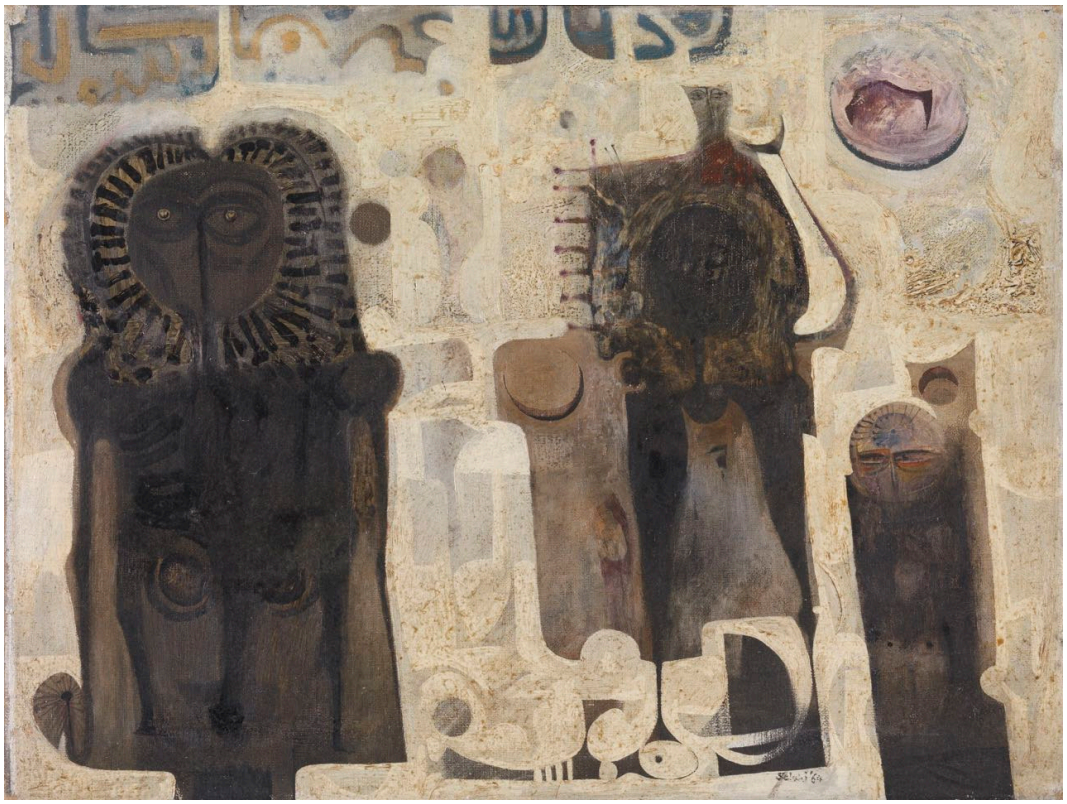
Susanne Wenger, *Die magische Frau*, 1960, *adire* (cassava starch batik), 334 x 194 cm, courtesy of the Susanne Wenger Foundation, photo by Martin Bilinovac

AO: What you said there about choosing works that are more appropriate for museum display made me think of these ethnographic museums that don't give that any thought. They would just acquire and display anything that they could lay their hands on in their space. It is only now there is this decolonisation trend that curators are becoming more self-reflexive and cognisant of this. That leads me to my new question. In an exhibition at Drawing Room, London, there is a work where people are allowed to handle files.[4] The artist (Jasmine Nilani Joseph) created drawings and they are in manilla folders, and you are allowed to handle them wearing gloves, with invigilators

[4] See Akin Oladimeji's review of 'The Land Sings Back' at Drawing Room, London, in ***Third Text* Online**, 10 November 2025, www.thirdtext.org/oladimeji-thelandsingsback

there to supervise you. I would love to have seen that for some of the issues of *Black Orpheus* magazine that you have on display. Was that considered at all?

OB: It was definitely a consideration. What is challenging with archival materials of such importance and historical value, and also fragility, is that they can't always be handled, even by curators. In fact, I didn't get to touch those objects. They were taken out of the binders and then presented to our conservators, who then condition-checked them and actually had to make decisions about which works could be left open because the staples that are often used to hold the pages together were, in some cases, rusting, and as such those publications couldn't be presented open. It is something I feel very passionately about, the fact that these objects of living history do require a certain level of physical engagement; they are magazines after all. There is, you would probably be interested to know, an incredible effort to digitise the volumes.[5] And I would say in terms of their display within the exhibition, part of the reason they are on that large vitrine table is that it is quite a shallow case, and it allows visitors to look directly and see some of the articles hat were published on figures like Ibrahim El-Salahi, for instance. El-Salahi was a really key figure



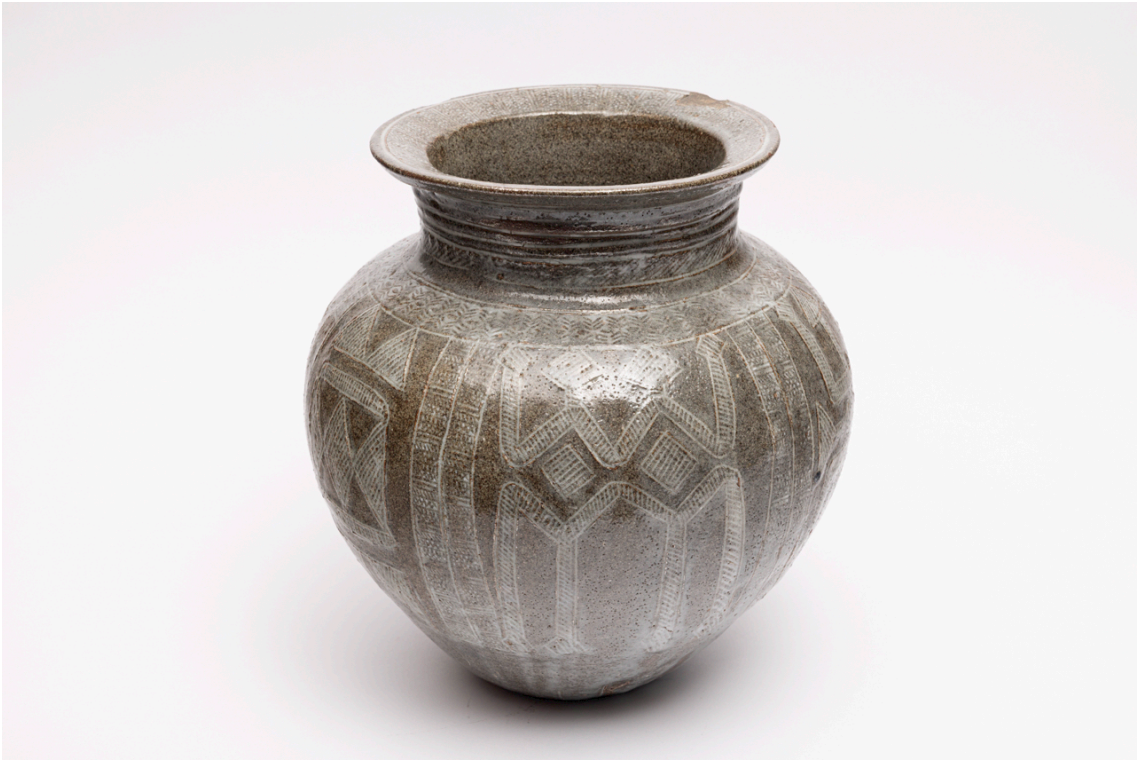
Ibrahim El-Salahi, *They Always Appear*, 1964, oil on canvas, 46 x 61 cm, Tate collection (purchased 2016), courtesy of the Tate galleries

[5] See 'Presenting the Digitized Black Orpheus Journals', *Olongo Africa*, 23 March 2025, https://olongoafrica.com/presenting-the-digitized-black-orpheus-journals

in the wider discourse around African modernism, but he also played a key role in the Mbari network, partly through a solo exhibition that was held there in 1961, and then articles that were written about his work, authored by, I believe, Dennis Williams, to commemorate that particular exhibition.[6] So there are really interesting ways in which those magazines, even though they're not entirely accessible, feel very much alive within the exhibition. That was the intention: to make sure that these publications didn't just become ephemera that were cast to one side, but are very much at the centre of generating knowledge and ideas around the various kinds of proposals being made by artists in relation to postcolonial, postrevolutionary forms of transnational modernism.

AO: The Ladi Kwali ceramics were brilliant to see, but I would have loved to get an understanding of the symbols in some of them.

OB: Lots of people have said this. It's something that was on our minds as we were putting the exhibition together. Ladi Kwali's work remains very much under-theorised. There are scholars such as Dr Jareh Das who have done really foundational work on Ladi Kwali, working with her archive and interviewing her family members. But fundamentally, the issue is that she never gave interviews in her lifetime in English that we have a documented record of. There isn't really much that can be



Ladi Kwali, *Water Pot* (undated), courtesy of the Estate of Ladi Kwali and the Crafts Study Centre at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, Surrey, UK

[6] See the entry for 'Mbari Mbayo Club' on Brittanica.com, www.britannica.com/topic/Mbari-Mbayo-Club

said around her particular use of these symbols apart from how one may read them within a tradition of Gwarri ceramic traditions, and I think a lot of that scholarship has yet to be fully researched or developed. So I would say that that was one of the challenges with her work. Even though those works are very powerful in their physicality and obviously the kind of technical excellence that they demonstrate, she is a figure who remains under-researched, so it was important in a way for that room to be there, almost as a pause in the exhibition, to reflect on the relative absence of women within histories of Nigerian art. Obviously, the fact that she was a ceramicist or a potter meant that her work was deemed largely as a kind of utilitarian practice rather than a formal artistic practice. So even among artists, there wouldn't have been much recognition or awareness of her practice beyond, obviously, her work through the pottery training centre as a ceramicist, but not necessarily as an exhibiting artist. I think that is an important aspect in a way, and one where more research could be undertaken in the future.

AO: Yes, indeed. So why should British people from non-Nigerian backgrounds come and see this?

OB: Well, a point we are making is that these histories aren't landlocked within Nigeria. Nigerian artists challenged colonial education, embraced new forms of pedagogy, travelled internationally in order to receive arts education elsewhere, and also encouraged some expansion of art programmes throughout the country and taught in various universities around the world. The exhibition reflects the ways in which Nigerian artists, really from the beginning of the twentieth century, were always part of an international conversation. And I think because of the kind of the entangled relationship between Britain and Nigeria during that period of British indirect rule, it is really important that we think about these works as also being part of Britain's cultural heritage and legacy. In a way, these artists speak to some of the first Nigerian diasporans to live in the UK and make art – for example, Ben Enwonwu, who upon arriving in the UK in the 1940s would have been one of the first African artists to receive a scholarship to study in the UK and, in turn, befriended members of the British modernist movement. He was deeply embedded in the cultural politics of, you could say, Black anticolonial resistance at the time.

So, in many ways, Enwonwu is a figure who signals the ways in which these artists were occupying the space, not only within the Nigerian cultural and political imaginary but also within the British art context. I think that's why it is critical, it's a story that is very much embedded within the wider politics of cosmopolitan modernities around the world during this period. But one of the other things is that many of these works signal the various ways in which Nigerian artists, or African artists more broadly, were constantly grappling with questions of what modernity and modernism meant for them. And I should say that they weren't seeking for their work to be qualified or accepted as modernist by a European audience, they were pulling together various narratives and

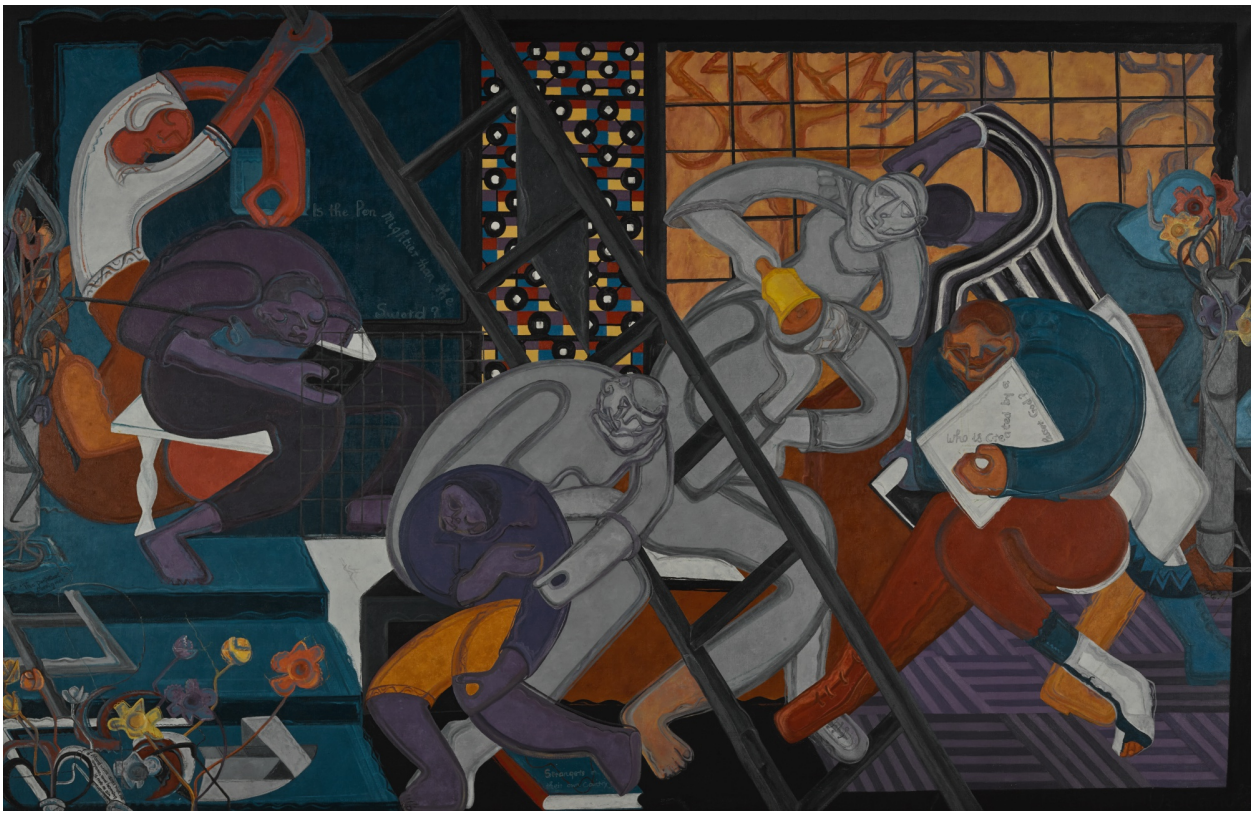
forms and ideas in order to fashion their own vision of modernity. That is something I've been very eager to emphasise. It is not necessarily about trying to fit these artists into a pre-existing canon but seeing them as belonging to their own artistic milieu and to their own artistic communities. That is what makes their work meaningful and worthy of celebration. I would say it's for all of those reasons. And also because I think the works are some of the most extraordinary works of art to be made in the twentieth century, largely because of the way in which they combine and synthesise various visual and cultural forms, including oral traditions and spiritual rites of passage. They engage with literature, poetry, aspects of craft and forms of making that have indigenous roots in Nigeria going back for many centuries. The way in which many of these artists revived these traditions and gave them new meaning through their work is worthy of celebration.

J D Okhai Ojeikere, *Untitled (Mkpuk Eba)*,1974, photograph, printed 2012, courtesy of the Tate

AO: I noticed the earliest works in the exhibition are photographs by Jonathan Adagogo Green from the 1890s and the most recent are from the 1990s. Why stop at the 1990s?

OB: By the 1990s, Nigeria had endured a period of military occupation, political, revolt, and you could say unrest, and also periods during which many Nigerians left the country. So actually by the 1980s/1990s, you had a number of Nigerians living all around the world, partly due to other forms of migration, but some of them were indeed in exile. And, actually, Uzo Egonu's work becomes the final room of the exhibition with a series looking at a period in his career that he referred to as painting in darkness, where he lost his sight, but he was also grappling with the pains about his estrangement from his homeland. He was feeling disconnected from Nigeria, not being able to recognise the kind of Nigeria that he'd left behind as a teenager in the events of what happened during and after Biafra. So that particular room of the exhibition grapples with the experience of many Nigerians during the 1980s and 1990s, and provides a perfect way of ending the century with this moment in which Nigerian artists are becoming much more a part of global networks, but

they're also questioning the politics and ethics of nationhood as a kind of collective political project, and maybe investing more in different ways of identifying with their spiritual, cultural and political identity. But it is not so much about this idea of a unified nation as much as it would have been in 1960, when artists were very much working in service of the idea of a new nation.



Uzo Egonu, *Will Knowledge Safeguard Freedom 2*, 1985, oil on canvas, 198 x 295 cm, courtesy of the collection of Tiana and Vikram Chellaram

AO: I adore the room that concentrates on Lagos with highlife in the background. Whose idea was that for the music?

OB: Early on we decided that it was important that what was formerly known as the Lagos Room, now the Eko Room, had this sense of the multidisciplinary exchange of art, music, architecture. But the challenging thing initially is that traditionally when you include music in an exhibition, because of the sound bleed, or the way that sound migrates, you typically want to introduce headphones people can put on and take off, but it felt to me that that would limit your experience of the cross-pollination or interdisciplinary nature of art being made at that time. So the decision was made to invite the DJ, Peter Adjaye, who has worked on every exhibition that I've done at Tate, to put together the playlist for the Eko Room. It's the original list of records based on the record collection of the artist, Yusuf Grillo, who lived in Lagos most of his life before he died in 2021. Peter actually had many of those

original records in his own collection and he drew them out and started putting together a playlist that we worked on. It's a soundscape and a playlist wrapped into one. That's how that came together. But it was initially put together in part because we realised we wouldn't necessarily be able to tell an accurate story of what was happening in Lagos in terms of art, music and architecture without there being some sense of… without creating a mise-en-scène or something that would almost transport people. Music obviously felt like the most practical but also imaginative way of doing that.

AO: I know, it was brilliant. It was immersive and fun.

OB: I appreciate that you enjoyed it because all these things are very, very difficult to execute and often these negotiations take a very long time.

AO: I can imagine.

OB: What you hope in the end is that people walk away with a sense that they experienced something which for them is rich and meaningful and dynamic. I think there will be more exhibitions, I hope, in this vein. But I know that, certainly for this particular exhibition, it was an exercise in how far we could push this idea of Nigerian modernism, looking at the various artists and groups. I don't think in any way it stops people from going and doing more research or taking things in different directions. And I'm already seeing lots of scholars reach out saying that they're researching particular artists and they want us to help them with making connections, etc. And that, for me, is the whole point of it; I hope it generates a real sense of curiosity among audiences that may not already be engaged with this work.

AO: Great. Thank you for talking to me.

OB: Thank you so much, Akin.

Akin Oladimeji is a critic, lecturer and writer. He is currently in the second year of a PhD at University College London (UCL) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.