



ELEPHANT

Njideka Akunyili

Nigerian-born, Brooklyn-based artist Njideka Akunyili's collages are tender vignettes of home life that she situates within culturally ambiguous spaces.

By Amandas Ong



The Search for Home

My work discusses the move between Enugu, where I grew up, and America, where I now live. I guess I'm trying to answer the bigger question of how I stay connected to the amorphous idea of 'home'. Both are home to me, and I'm trying to capture a very elusive sense of belonging that is really neither here nor there. It's difficult, even impossible, to distil all these complex feelings into one composition. If I'm doing a painting set in a living room in Nigeria, I try and summon my earliest memories of the days I spent in Enugu and Lagos, and think about what I can see, hear and smell. I do my best to recall very specific things: snapshots within family albums, refreshments on the table, magazines that I saw lying around the house when I was young. I want to share with others the joy of living, and having lived, in two countries that I know and love deeply. I'm not sugar-coating or romanticizing ideas about Nigeria or the USA. I'm not looking for emotion.

From Biology to Art

I did Studio Art and Biology in college – this combination is more common than you might think! If you look at the botanists and zoologists of the Enlightenment, a lot of them were pretty talented at drawing as well. Maybe it's because both disciplines are somewhat concerned with pattern recognition. I was good at Biology because I'm a very visual person, and I believe that any artistic endeavour can borrow from the precision of science too.



And We Begin to Live, 2018, acrylic, pastel, colour pencils, charcoal, marble dust, collage and transfers on paper, 20 1/2 x 26 1/2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tiwari Contemporary.



Two Times in New Haven, Enugu, 2013, acrylic, collage, colour pencils, charcoal and transfers on paper, 23 1/2 x 28 1/2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tiwari Contemporary.



Festive (left panel), 2011, acrylic, charcoal, colour pencils and transfers on paper, 20 1/2 x 20 1/2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tiwari Contemporary.



The Materiality of Shifting Cultures

I use Rives BFK paper: it hangs like a tapestry, receives paint well, has a very specific textural consistency and produces a sensual effect. Seeing my works in person is very different from seeing them online. I try to make each piece cinematic, so I push the surface of the paper to its limits. When you put very shiny paint on a matte surface, you create an optical shift from some parts to others. I am intrigued by the experience of visually traversing multiple worlds, not just in a literal sense from Nigeria to USA. I'm also referring to different languages of image making. I like mixing a bit of everything in my works, from flat, geometric shapes to the rich, voluminous style that's associated with Renaissance paintings. You could say that what I'm trying to achieve here is a global sampling of things. I use a lot of acrylic, although my training was in oil painting. To keep my work interesting for myself, I experiment with unconventional materials as well, such as iridescent paints and even crushed marble.

Creating Coloured Patterns

I gravitate towards earthy colours, so it comes as a surprise to many when I say that I have to step out of my comfort zone to create my collage paintings. I often ask myself: what would Matisse do? Another major influence on the colours and patterns in my work is my husband, who loves sneakers and all these other visually arresting examples of urban culture. I also look at my own experiences of interior design for visual reference. For instance, one of my collages features an Ikea table and a futon, which are pieces of furniture that I have in my house in America, whereas the screen that I painted in the background of the image reminds me of Nigeria.

Heroes and Heroines

Chinua Achebe is phenomenal. I can't even describe how much of a difference he made to the lives of my generation and my parents' generation. He opened the door and showed people the urgency of African people needing to tell their own story. There is this old saying that 'until the lion learns to speak, the tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter'. Achebe proved to everyone the perils of telling the African story – our African story – from a single, colonial perspective, and taught us that it's so incredibly important for us to complicate this story, however that needs to be done.



The Beautiful Ones Sleep Here, 2010, acrylic, colour pencil and transfers on paper, 22 1/2 x 24 1/2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tiwari Contemporary.



The Beautiful Ones Sleep Here, 2010, acrylic, charcoal, collage and transfers on paper, 18 1/2 x 24 1/2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tiwari Contemporary.