

ARTS & REVIEW

AT THIS DAY PUBLICATION

29. 6. 2025

Celebrating the Colours and Sensibilities of West Africa

A recent group exhibition on the sidelines of the recently held West African Economic Summit in Abuja celebrated the potential of the sub-region's creative genius. **Okechukwu Uwaezuoke** reports

Having featured a coterie of West Africa's visionary artists, the exhibition, *Unleashing West Africa's Creative Economy*, it turned out, was a roaring curatorial success, much to the delight of discerning aficionados. With its eclectic mix of innovative installations, vibrant paintings, and thought-provoking sculptures, the exhibition showcased the sub-region's vibrant creative potential, perfectly complementing the recent two-day West African Economic Summit (WAES). What could have been a logistical and artistic challenge proved to be a masterclass in synchronising diverse ideas, earning pats on the back for curator Nduwhite Ndubuisi Ahanonu and his team, which included the innovative Lagos-based Mathew Oyedele, among others.

Owing to Foreign Affairs Minister Yusuf Maitama Tuggar's high octane idea of adding art exhibitions to his soft diplomacy menu – a bold move that birthed the Atrium Gallery at the Foreign Affairs Ministry's quadrangle – the exhibition's venue at Abuja's spruced-up International Conference Centre (now rechristened after President Bola Ahmed Tinubu) attracted a veritable Who's Who of dignitaries. These included the president himself, a handful of his ministers, monarchs, parastatal heads, and diplomatic corps members, who came to pay homage to the creative genius on display.

With the curatorial team's skillful striking of a delicate balance between the featured artists' diverse aesthetic idiosyncrasies, the exhibition stood head and shoulders above the rest, outshining most group shows in the federal capital city and beyond. This triumph was all the more notable given its deft sidestepping of those numbingly predictable offerings that often leave viewers with the feeling of having seen it all before – a sense of déjà vu that can be as dull as a spreadsheet.

That said, it is worth noting that the dominance of Nigerian artists in the selection can be attributed more to logistical reasons, especially given the extremely short duration of the exhibition, than to a intentional bias. If, for instance, getting the artists to meet the deadline was a challenge, how much more daunting would it have been to freight works across the sub-region to Abuja for a show that opened on June 20 only to close the next day, June 21!

Among the works by Nigerian artists, the luminary Bruce Onobrakpeya's 1981 patented low relief on metal "Sahelian Masquerade" (Adjene and Kabiyesi) stood out in its staid simplicity. Talking about this nonagenarian, his creative frenzy could put even a Gen-Z artist to shame, making everyone else look like they are stuck in a creative rut. Peju Layiwola, currently based in the US, meanwhile, is making waves across the Atlantic with her 2016 low relief metal 2-D offering, titled "Abe Igi", proving that distance is no barrier to relevance (or in this case, asserting her pedigree). Other notable artists also featured were Krydz Ikwuemesi, whose 2015 Uli motifs-suffused acrylic on board work "So Long a Letter" held court all by itself in an unobtrusive corner of the exhibition hall, and Samuel Nnorom, who flaunts his African fabric sculptures "Thinking It Through" and "Echoes of Hope" with youthful exuberance.

Victor Ehikhamenor's 2021 mixed-media work, "No Sympathy for the King" – contrived with perforations and gold leaf on



A view of the exhibition hall



Another view of the exhibition hall

handmade paper proclaims him as consistently unpredictable, unlike a Nollywood movie plot twist, while Gerald Chukwuma's mixed-media panels, "Heads of State" and "I Know What Lives in My Sun", proclaim El Anatsui's influence from the rooftops. Mufu Onifade's 2021 acrylic on canvas paintings, "Ooya Ma Ya Wa" (Marital Bond) and "Ojo Kela" (Third Day), revisit the aesthetic canons of his ancient heritage. And then there's Abuja-based ballpoint artist Jacqueline Suowari, who proves that even the most modest of tools can create masterpieces – and that pens, often alleged to be mightier than swords, are just pens that are really good at drawing. If these artists are deemed to have stood out in their creative brilliance, it is not just because of a contractual obligation to praise Nigerian art.

Beyond Nigeria's borders, a vibrant array of artistic voices from the sub-region added depth and complexity to the exhibition. Ghana's Amarkine Amarteifio skewers the widening chasm between the haves and have-nots with his biting acrylic on canvas paintings, "The Interruption" (2022) and "PIECEful Co-existence" (2023), serving up a visual commentary that is both pointed and poignant. Meanwhile, Burkinabe artist Christophe Sawadogo's blurred faces in "Aisha" and "Sisterhood" (2025) whisper secrets of collective humanity, reminding the

viewer that anonymity can be a universal language. Across the border in Côte d'Ivoire, Abidjan-based Togolese artist Sadikou Oukpedjo's ethereal figures, seemingly floating like ghosts, hint at the fragility and the animal origin of man's physical body. And in a dexterous blend of colours, Malian artist Abdoulaye Konate's textile collages, "Composition en vert motifs..." and "Composition en bleu au triangle rouge", celebrate the exuberant palette of local aesthetics, proving that even in fragments, beauty can be whole.

Unleashing West Africa's Creative Economy was a triumph of creativity and diplomacy, igniting a spark that could fuel a wave of innovation in the West African art circles for years to come. By showcasing the sub-region's vibrant artistic talent, the exhibition proved that art can be a potent ambassador, bridging cultures and borders with ease. With its bold vision, creative genius, and masterful curation, the exhibition was a masterclass in artistic storytelling, leaving discerning aficionados and art enthusiasts alike in awe of the region's boundless potential. As a beacon of artistic excellence, the group exhibition will continue to resonate, inspiring future generations of artists, curators, and art lovers to push the boundaries of creativity and innovation.