

# Gallery 1957

## *Oliver Okolo's Search for Empirical Truth*

*An Essay by Oliver Enwonwu for the exhibition I Forgot To Tell You, Now Listen  
29 October - 27 November, 2021*

Oliver Okolo has emerged as one of the most exciting artists working out of Nigeria today and is a central figure in a new vanguard whose portrayal of Black people in confident and assertive gaze, challenges and dismantles negative racial constructs and knowledge systems. The 20 mixed media works presented in *I Forgot to Tell You, Now Listen*—the title of Okolo's first solo exhibition—holding at Gallery 1957 in Accra, lend voice to this assertion. Individually powerful, they collectively form the thrust of the artist's "psychological introspection"<sup>1</sup>, underscoring his present exploration of identity, ethnicity, status and the human condition. Significantly, they also build upon his earlier body of work 'Portraits of the Life Elizabeth Freeman', featured as part of a recent large-themed group exhibition with 15 other artists at the same gallery, to mark another milestone in its contributions to contemporary art developments on the continent.

A cursory look at both bodies of work show a preoccupation with portraiture, arguably the hallmark of Oliver Okolo's art as evidenced by an exceptional capability for storytelling, remarkable approach to composition, colour, space and light and deftness in rendering his sitters in an empathetic manner that betrays their humaneness. Obvious differences between these bodies rests in their thematic framework, with the former critically examining defining moments that shaped Freeman's life as an abolitionist, while the latter and current, *I Forgot to Tell You, Now Listen*, is strongly personal and of a more intimate nature. In many ways, this series may be construed as revisionist, serving as a vehicle to articulate Okolo's notion of ethnicity and to include previously unknown but significant aspects of the artist's life and more importantly, his use of memorialisation as a tool for socio-cultural and political mediation. The artist summarises his aims for the exhibition as:

A need to reveal important details of my existence. I forgot to tell you that my Igbo heritage is interwoven with my contemporary way of life and consequently impacts on my thinking and creative process. Growing up, in Enu Avomini, Anambra, I questioned some of the cultural and socio-political norms and beliefs of *ndi Igbo*, accepting only a few. These personal opinions have moulded me in to whom I am today. I also forgot to share with you my perspective on the role tradition has played in shaping our mentality as Black people today and how culture has defined us as good or bad by improving or diminishing morality and humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Against this background, the exhibition can be interpreted clearly as Okolo's search for empirical truth in defining his reality. The title of the exhibition therefore becomes apt. It describes markedly, an increasing reflection upon his early

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childhood and how these formative years influenced his evolution as an artist. He recalls:

Some of my experiences while growing up were: listening to folklore and stories of the Nigerian Civil War (1967—70) my grandmother and father told me; engaging in indigenous festivals and ceremonies including my initiation into an age grade when I attained adulthood. Other experiences that impacted heavily on me were an annual pilgrimage in December from the city to my village, and working closely with my father who was also artistically gifted. Being an architect, he was preoccupied with drawing lines; this must have sparked my interest in art. Today, I am an artist who contemplates deeply upon his cultural background and beliefs, and how they have influenced the narrative and aesthetics of his work.<sup>3</sup>

Okolo's viewpoint may serve to demolish or establish historical truths. According to art historian Peju Layiwola who explains how the present day Binis have through memorialisation, suppressed the bitter events of the British Punitive Expedition of 1897, which resulted in an exiling of the Oba. "...people are bound to remember and recount things that touch on their existence as a people and sometimes also try to suppress feelings or experiences that are painful."<sup>4</sup> Parallels can be drawn between the Binis and the Igbos. With over 2 million casualties, the latter are still reeling from the traumatic as well as socio-economic effects of the civil war.<sup>5</sup> Two paintings: *Black in Blue Suit*, mixed media on canvas, 48 x 72 inches and *Untitled*, oil and charcoal on paper, 43 x 60 inches, featured in the exhibition best articulate Okolo's socio-cultural and political mediation in allaying these painful feelings amongst the Igbo while fostering genuine reconciliation across the Nigerian nation.

The impact of the war was strongly felt on the larger Okolo family. Oliver Okolo's grandfather Okolongweze served as a recruit in the Biafran army. His son Michael, then a 20 year-old would later assume this position until he filled a vacancy in the kitchen following an uncle's plea with the command that he be spared as an only son.<sup>6</sup> In *Black in Blue Suit*, Oliver Okolo depicts his father Michael (1947—1997) in a short-sleeved safari suit as was typical of him. The portrait of the deceased was not painted from photographic references but recalled from memory to echo the tales of the Nigerian civil war his father regaled him with. Its pale blue colour is of great significance to the artist. He asserts that it is a metaphor for his flair for storytelling and represents the elder Okolo's quiet strength, resilience and masculinity.

Oliver Okolo's maternal grandmother Okoye Gloria Nwanedoanya (1937—1996) also witnessed first-hand the savageness of the war. Better known as Ericowanyi, she was well regarded as a heroine in her village Irape Irukpeloke. Confronting her own mortality, she would dare the crossfire on the warfront to sell groceries at the local market to fend for her family.<sup>7</sup> *Untitled*, also created from memory immortalises Nwanedoanya by casting her as a wise old sage. Arguably, these war time recollections and folktales transmitted to Okolo by his ancestors lend his art historical significance, as well as root it in Igbo traditions and mythology. His passion

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for preserving the ebbing sense of history and cultural values of the Igbos of West Africa, owing to such events as the advent of Christianity, Western education, rapid industrialisation and colonisation, is what infuses in his work an air of uniqueness. According to Layiwola, "The remembrance shows the manner by which the past promotes a subject in which the present continually interacts in order to produce a new consciousness."<sup>8</sup> This assertion also supports Okolo's intervention in other ways. He concurs:

There are two paintings in the exhibition that underscore my underlying philosophy. First, *Self Portrait*, the highlight, is about the artist's curiosity at play. The emotion felt in the artist's eyes reveals his innermost feelings. As a child, I accepted so many things about my culture but fully grown, I began to question those I disagreed with.<sup>9</sup>

The caste system in Igboland lends itself easily to Okolo's pondering. An ancient practice, it discourages social interaction and marriage with the Osu, a group of people dedicated to deities like Alu. Considered unclean, inferior beings and slaves, the Osu are often offenders who are punished for flouting Alu's laws.<sup>10</sup> Their penance is to ensure that consequent abominable acts do not befall the land.<sup>11</sup> The second painting, *The Rejects Meet in Heaven* speaks against the Ohu caste system and the discrimination some Igbos have experienced through it. Okolo continues:

The dehumanisation brought about by the Osu, Ume and Ohu is one of the most glaring problems we face in our modern society. Even though this evil system was abolished, the stigma still rests in the hearts of those affected. In the painting, 3 Black male figures symbolise the Osu, Ume and Ohu. They represent the different forms of discrimination we face today culturally, religiously, and politically including Black on Black discrimination, racism and white supremacy.<sup>12</sup>

Much of the power of Okolo's art is hinged on his deep empathy for humanity. He asserts:

In my figurative paintings, I discuss broadly about matters that have been left unsaid. I talk about things that concern humanity, speak about my personal experiences and offer my opinion. As an artist, one cannot explore all the possibilities that lie in the expression and story behind each person. In every painting, I draw out emotions through composition, gesture, and expression, to find out what makes us who we are and how at the same time, we differ and remain the same. In my portraits, I pay a lot of attention to my subjects eyes as they are a gate way to the truth that lies behind the soul.<sup>13</sup>

A more sophisticated approach and increased technical facility are evident in Oliver Okolo's present offering. The artist's chosen medium of charcoal, his technique, as well as process are vital to his art. His works are easily distinguishable by an attention to detail, their appeal lying in the skilful execution and subtle rendering of form.

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I have always been intrigued by old things and how they have stood the test of time. Charcoal is the oldest medium of art known to man. Its versatility is limitless and its texture and darkness are unlike any other I have known. In my culture, it was used as a medium for writing and expression. I feel strongly connected to that history each time I embrace it. <sup>14</sup>

Okolo speaks of his technique as a “simple, yet complex one”.<sup>15</sup> As a figurative artist, he draws most of his inspiration from the everyday people around him. In addition, he references the past because he believes that through it, “one can fill in the gaps of life to navigate the hurdles in the future.”<sup>16</sup> Okolo’s process typically begins with photoshoots of his models. Back in the studio, he works from the references to create fully-finished charcoal drawings on thick, acid-free Strathmore paper, which he introduces onto his canvas with a strong adhesive. Following this, he blocks in the paint, ignoring the areas rendered in charcoal and later adding several glazes in the manner of the Old Masters. Importantly, his palette consisting mostly of burnt umber and muted earth-tones is reminiscent of the Renaissance period.

I studied the Old Masters because I wanted to understand their thought process and learn their traditional ways, I fused these secrets with my contemporary techniques and called it ‘classical-contemporarism’ because the process itself is both traditional and classical including the lighting but the composition and eventual outcome are also contemporary.<sup>17</sup>

For Okolo, drawing is a means to not only maintaining precision and authenticity but also sanity. He considers it his strongest form of expression. With oils however, he is exploring its inherent possibilities, what the medium means to him in terms of originality, style and freedom, as well as how it reflects his personality. This exploration has evolved into a synthesis—in each work—of all his chosen media and materials such as drawing, painting, collage, charcoal, oils, acrylics, pastels, paper and canvas.

In all, Oliver Okolo’s success rests firmly on revealing the hidden dimensions that lie behind the façade of everyday existence. By inviting us to contemplate upon our past, Okolo contributes to the perfection of the individual. We are thus compelled to set aside our conditioned ways of thinking and meditate in seeking answers to questions regarding our purpose, death and eventual transition.

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## Notes

1. Press release: "Collective Reflections: Contemporary African and Diasporic Expressions of a New Vanguard", Group Exhibition, Gallery 1957, Accra, accessed August 17, 2021
2. Okolo, interview with Enwonwu, September 25, 2021
3. Ibid.
4. Adepeju Layiwola, "The Benin Massacre: Memories and Experiences," in *Benin: King's and Rituals-Court Arts from Nigeria*, ed. Barbara Plankensteiner, (Snoeck Publishers, 2007): 83
5. "Osu Caste System," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osu\\_caste\\_system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osu_caste_system), accessed October 14, 2021
6. Okolo, interview with Enwonwu, August 17, 2021
7. Ibid.
8. Layiwola
9. Okolo, interview with Enwonwu, August 17, 2021
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.