



NWANTINTI (2012) BY NJIDEKA AKUNYILI

## COLLAGE GRADUATE

**N**jideka Akunyili is making an indelible mark on the contemporary art world. The Nigerian-born, New York City-based artist has emerged as one of the leaders of the next generation of visual art stars from the African diaspora and her name is on the tip of the tongue for many art collectors and curators. Her visually stunning paintings and collages are making their presence felt on the world stage too, from Art Basel in Switzerland to her current exhibition, Primary Colors, at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where Akunyili is an artist in residence.

### When did you start making art?

I grew up drawing things I saw in magazines. But I didn't really start painting until I came to America, which was in 1999. Painting wasn't big in Nigeria. I took drawing classes – it was easy, you just needed paper and a pencil. Oil painting requires a lot more than we had available to us.

### How did you get into oil painting?

After we graduated from high school my mum wanted us to spend a year in America before we started university, to get used to the culture and school system. In that year I took classes at the Community College of Philadelphia. I took a calculus class, an American literature class and, for fun, a painting class. That was my first time using oil paint. It was really difficult but I loved it.

### How supportive have your family been about you becoming an artist?

It was a very slow process. I was on track to go to medical school. They couldn't understand why I would give up medicine for art. It wasn't like I was struggling. In Nigeria there is such prestige around being a doctor that if you can do it, you do it. When you think about artists, you think about the

people with shacks on the side of the road who paint barbershops and salons. Most often their parents weren't wealthy enough to send them to college. My parents couldn't comprehend why I would choose that when I had the opportunity to study abroad and the world was open to me. Why choose something that's done by people who didn't even go to college?

### Tell us about the different themes in your work?

One of them is the presence of Nigeria. My formative years were spent there and I feel very connected to the country. In my work I'm creating this repetition of Nigerian imagery. It's almost as if I'm trying to hang on to something that I feel is slipping away from me. I also think Nigerians aren't really aware of this other level of art that exists. I wasn't aware of it until I left the country. So I have the desire to pull Nigerians into that discussion: do Nigerians not care about art because we just don't know how to look at art, or because we don't feel like it addresses us? Think about Nigerian movies; the production could be better, the stories could be better but people still consume huge quantities. Why? Because they are stories that resonate with us.

### Is that what you are trying to accomplish through your work? To tell these stories?

I'm not setting out to accomplish that. I would like for a Nigerian to walk into a museum or gallery and see something that makes sense to them. Or something that makes them care, so art is not this esoteric thing that they don't understand.

### What is art to you?

My work is so rooted in drawing and painting that it really is a visual manifestation of my thoughts. You can think something, put it down on paper and someone random could walk into a gallery and get what you were thinking.

“DO NIGERIANS NOT CARE ABOUT ART BECAUSE WE JUST DON'T KNOW HOW TO LOOK AT ART, OR BECAUSE IT DOESN'T ADDRESS US?”

### Which artists have inspired you?

The first person would be Velázquez. If you find a contemporary artist and trace back their lineage, it seems that everything leads back to Velázquez. He is a genius. I also like Yinka Shonibare. When I saw his work for the first time I had that spontaneous recognition, like I know what this work is about. Before that I had been to art school, I would go to shows, I could appreciate it formally, but I never felt that connection. It was a very powerful emotion.

### Can you talk a little about the photo transfers that you incorporate into your images?

The photo transfers are images from multiple places – from my wedding, from back home, images from Nigerian fashion and society magazines and music albums. I pick images when I get that feeling of 'I know this experience' – even if I wasn't at the party. I use a lot of images of people, objects, scenes that will be familiar to Nigerians. It's fun if you're Nigerian, but if you're not then I'm inviting you to see life like I know it in Nigeria.

### When people look at your work, what do you want them to walk away with?

In post-colonial theory they have this term called 'third space' and it is the space that is caused when two cultures come together. And the fascinating thing about the third space is that it's not culture A + culture B, it really is a whole new culture that is born. I am making work that exists in that space. I think that also comes from my personal life, being a Nigerian who married an American and existing in this weird new in-between space, which is neither here nor there. That space has a tension within it, it vibrates. It's really a space of engagement.

□ [njidekaakunyili.com](#)



## OFF THE SHELF

**S**outh African designer Wanga Ngwane is on a roll. Not content with producing modular furniture for his Cape Town-based UB Creative Studios, he also lectures in Surface Design at Cape Peninsula University of Technology. "Design proved to be my remedy in finding a balance to life's challenges," he says. This explains why in 2009 he founded Ubuntu Bethu, an initiative for young South Africans which uncovers design potential in destitute communities. "We are currently involved in the 20 Schools:1 City project with MoDILA [the Museum of Design, Innovation, Leadership and Art] to nurture design talent in the country."

Inspired by his local community and surroundings, Ngwane's own work takes a refreshing shift away from literal interpretations of Africa. Hints of symbolism and

history delicately fuse with contemporary design and functionality. "My style is based on indigenous knowledge, as I've never been anywhere except Africa," he says. "I take what I've learnt from the way of life here, and combine it with technology and other cultures."

Ngwane's Equilibrium Chair was part of the project that won Best Stand at Design Indaba 2008, and he now produces one-off designs for Trevyn McGowan, founder of South African design powerhouse Southern Guild. "Every piece I have created has been my favourite, as they are all manifestations of my growth as a designer," says Ngwane, "but if I had to choose one, it's got to be the multifunctional Neaonimm bookshelf [pictured above]. It's inspired by the West African Adinkra wisdom symbol, meaning 'he who does not know can know from learning.' Wise words indeed.



## LIFE IS SWEET

**C**ape Town locals love Honest Chocolate so much that the duo behind the artisan chocolate company are opening another kitchen and shop, in Woodstock, just over a year after opening in 2011. Owners Anthony Gird and Michael de Klerk, plus their two chocolate makers Sive and Mabuya, make and sell raw, organic and ethically sourced cacao and agave nectar bonbons, spread and slabs at outlets in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Namibia. A new slab is also about to be launched, containing a secret, revolutionary ingredient from Ghana. And no, we didn't find out what it is. As with all Honest Chocolate bars, it will be wrapped in eco-friendly paper with an exclusive design by a local artist on the front. Feedback from the 2011 Good Food And Wine Show in Cape Town, where Honest Chocolate won Best Speciality Product Display, ranged from: "It's dark, hey?" to "Oh my God, that is orgasmic". The people have spoken. □ [honestchocolate.co.za](#)



## OLYMPICS

## GREAT ESCAPES

Nearly as many African countries who won a medal at the 2012 Olympic Games also 'lost' members of their delegations while in London. Ethiopia was the only medal-winning African nation to reportedly lose a member of its team; seven of the Cameroon team and four from Eritrea absconded.

The four Eritrean athletes, including 18-year-old Weynay Ghebresilasie, who carried the flag at the opening ceremony, and Team Eritrea's sole female athlete, Rehaset Mehari, all claimed asylum, according to pressure group the Eritrean Youth Solidarity for Change (EYSC).

"Even though Eritrea is a relative newcomer to the Olympic Games, its athletes have performed well," said Daniel G Mikael, Chairman of the EYSC. "Under normal circumstances that in itself would have created more hope and inspiration for athletes to want to go back and prepare for another chance to represent their country and also achieve personal glory. But conditions in Eritrea are far from normal. Living under a very authoritarian system that doesn't respect individual freedom is unbearable for young people. And while the choice is rarely easy, Eritrean athletes and soccer players have

repeatedly used their status as an opportunity to escape tyranny. "While most Eritreans regret the news that even the flag bearer won't go back, they understand that unless the country goes toward democratisation and a sense of normal life, these stories will repeat. Hopefully by the time of the 2016 Games, such stories will be things of the past and those who have escaped will return home."

The London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games notify police in such cases but absconding athletes and delegation members generally have visas running until November

so won't infringe British immigration laws until then. Under the Schengen agreement between EU countries, anyone granted asylum needs to prove their life would be at risk if they returned home. A spokesperson for the International Olympic Committee said: "All Olympians must qualify or be invited to the Games following a strict and transparent process. All are selected by their National Olympic Committees, which have the responsibility of taking care of their welfare during the Games. Seeking asylum remains a personal decision and the IOC is therefore not in a position to comment."

### AFRICAN 2012 OLYMPIC MEDAL WINNERS

COUNTRY	GOLD	SILVER	BRONZE	TOTAL
Ethiopia	3	1	3	7
Kenya	2	4	5	11
Tunisia	1	1	1	3
Algeria	1	0	0	1
Uganda	1	0	0	1
Egypt	0	2	0	2
Botswana	0	1	0	1
Gabon	0	1	0	1
Morocco	0	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>34</b>

### "MISSING" AFRICANS AT LONDON 2012

COUNTRY	NUMBER
Cameroon	7
Eritrea	4
DR Congo	4
Guinea	3
Côte d'Ivoire	3
Sudan	3
Ethiopia	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>



**NAMI'S** ballet pumps are a stylish yet comfortable combination of soft leather and colourful ankara print. Expertly created by artisans in Nigeria, they're available from [namilondon.com](#) for £60. Guaranteed to cheer up any outfit in an instant.